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Preface

About OpenStax

OpenStax is a non-profit organization committed to improving student access to quality learning materials. Our free textbooks are developed and peer-reviewed by educators to ensure they are readable, accurate, and meet the scope and sequence requirements of modern college courses. Unlike traditional textbooks, OpenStax resources live online and are owned by the community of educators using them. Through our partnerships with companies and foundations committed to reducing costs for students, OpenStax is working to improve access to higher education for all. OpenStax is an initiative of Rice University and is made possible through the generous support of several philanthropic foundations.

About This Book

Welcome to *Introduction to Sociology 2e*, an OpenStax resource created with several goals in mind: accessibility, affordability, customization, and student engagement—all while encouraging learners toward high levels of learning. Instructors and students alike will find that this textbook offers a strong foundation in sociology. It is available for free online and in low-cost print and e-book editions.

To broaden access and encourage community curation, *Introduction to Sociology 2e* is “open source” licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license. Everyone is invited to submit examples, emerging research, and other feedback to enhance and strengthen the material and keep it current and relevant for today’s students. You can make suggestions by contacting us at Support@OpenStax.org.

To the Student

This book is written for you and is based on the teaching and research experience of numerous sociologists. In today’s global socially networked world, the topic of sociology is more relevant than ever before. We hope

that through this book, you will learn how simple, everyday human actions and interactions can change the world. In this book, you will find applications of sociology concepts that are relevant, current, and balanced.

To the Instructor

This text is intended for a one-semester introductory course. Since current events influence our social perspectives and the field of sociology in general, OpenStax encourages instructors to keep this book fresh by sending in your up-to-date examples to Support@OpenStax.org so that students and instructors around the country can relate and engage in fruitful discussions.

General Approach

Introduction to Sociology 2e adheres to the scope and sequence of a typical introductory sociology course. In addition to comprehensive coverage of core concepts, foundational scholars, and emerging theories we have incorporated section reviews with engaging questions, discussions that help students apply the sociological imagination, and features that draw learners into the discipline in meaningful ways. Although this text can be modified and reorganized to suit your needs, the standard version is organized so that topics are introduced conceptually, with relevant, everyday experiences.

Changes to the Second Edition

Part of the mission of the second edition update was to ensure the research, examples and concepts used in this textbook are current and relevant to today's student. To this end, we have rewritten the introduction of each chapter to reflect the latest developments in sociology, history and global culture. In addition to new graphs and images, the reader of the second edition will find new feature boxes on a diverse array of topics, which has been one of the goals of the update—bringing the world into greater focus through case studies on global culture.

For instance, since the first edition there have been major cultural shifts within the Middle East and Arab world—a movement still underway called the Arab Spring—changes that are now incorporated into our coverage on social movements and social unrest (Chapter 21, “Social Movements and Social Change”). New issues in immigration, in the United States and across the world, have been brought to the forefront of the second edition, as rising income gaps and modern transportation are responsible for trends in Europe (fears of Islamic conservatism and economic recession) and political debates in the U.S. (such as border security, universal education and health care).

Since the first edition in 2012, technology and social media has ushered in new forms of communication, and, of course, these changes are altering the fabric of social life around the world. The benefits and downfalls of new technologies are reflected in new material in Chapter 4, “Society and Social Interaction,” where we discuss how social media is changing classical models of social stratification and prestige.

In addition to updating critical facts, data, and policies from the first edition, we have expanded on essential topics, including:

Feminism and feminist theory	Health care legislation
US social stratification	Minimum wage policies
Transgender issues and changes to the DSM-V	Global statistics on education
Marriage and pay equality	Competing theories of tolerance
The use of charter schools	Cyberbullying

Impact of economy on population segments	Climate change debates
Use of technology and social media by	Global population and demographic shifts
individuals and groups	Net neutrality, online privacy and security

Other topics received a light update for relevance and student engagement. The racial tensions that have come about through the cases of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, as well as the legalization of marijuana are two examples of such additions.

Features of OpenStax Introduction to Sociology 2e

We have retained and updated the special features of the original text for this updated version.

Modularity

This textbook is organized on Connexions (http://cnx.org) as a collection of modules that can be rearranged and modified to suit the needs of a particular professor or class. That being said, modules often contain references to content in other modules, as most topics in sociology cannot be discussed in isolation.

Learning Objectives

Every module begins with a set of clear and concise learning objectives. These objectives are designed to help the instructor decide what content to include or assign, and to guide the student with respect to what he or she can expect to learn. After completing the module and end-of-module

exercises, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of the learning objectives.

Key Features

The following features show students the dynamic nature of sociology:

Sociological Research: Highlights specific current and relevant research studies. Examples include “Is Music a Cultural Universal?” and “Deceptive Divorce Rates.”
Sociology in the Real World: Ties chapter content to student life and discusses sociology in terms of the everyday. Topics include “Secrets of the McJob” and “Grade Inflation: When Is an A Really a C?”
Big Picture: Features present sociological concepts at a national or international level, including “Education in Afghanistan” and “American Indian Tribes and Environmental Racism.”
Case Study: Describes real-life people whose experiences relate to chapter content, such as “Catherine Middleton: The Commoner Who Would Be Queen.”
Social Policy and Debate: Discusses political issues that relate to chapter content, such as “The Legalese of Sex and Gender” and “Is the U.S. Bilingual?”
Careers in Sociology: Explores the lives and work of those in careers in sociology, including the real-world issues and debates these professionals encounter on a daily basis.

Section Summaries

Section summaries distill the information in each section for both students and instructors down to key, concise points addressed in the section.

Key Terms

Key terms are bold and are followed by a definition in context. Definitions of key terms are also listed in the Glossary, which appears at the end of the module online and at the end of the chapter in print.

Section Quizzes

Section quizzes provide opportunities to apply and test the information students learn throughout each section. Both multiple-choice and short-response questions feature a variety of question types and range of difficulty.

Further Research

This feature helps students further explore the section topic and offers related research topics that could be explored.

Acknowledgements

Introduction to Sociology is based on the work of numerous professors, writers, editors, and reviewers who are able to bring topics to students in the most engaging way.

We would like to thank all those listed below as well as many others who have contributed their time and energy to review and provide feedback on the manuscript. Especially Clint Lalonde and team at BC Campus for sharing the updates they made for use in this edition, and the team at Stark State College for their editorial support in this update. Their input has been critical in maintaining the pedagogical integrity and accuracy of the text.

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Supplements

Accompanying the main text is an Instructor's PowerPoint file, which includes all of the images and captions found throughout the text and an Instructor's test bank.

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Introduction to Sociology
class="introduction"

Sociologists study how society affects people and how people affect society. (Photo courtesy of Diego Torres Silvestre/flickr)

We all belong to many groups; you're a member of your sociology class, and you're a member of your family; you may belong to a political party, sports team, or the crowd watching a sporting event; you're a citizen of your country, and you're a part of a generation. You may have a somewhat different role in each group and feel differently in each.

Groups vary in their sizes and formalities, as well as in the levels of attachment between group members, among other things. Within a large group, smaller groups may exist, and each group may behave differently.

At a rock concert, for example, some may enjoy singing along, others prefer to sit and observe, while still others may join in a mosh pit or try crowd surfing. Why do we feel and act differently in different types of social situations? Why might people of a single group exhibit different behaviors in the same situation? Why might people acting similarly not feel connected to others exhibiting the same behavior? These are some of the many questions sociologists ask as they study people and societies.

What Is Sociology?

- Explain concepts central to sociology
- Understand how different sociological perspectives have developed

Sociologists learn about society as a whole while studying one-to-one and group interactions. (Photo courtesy of Gareth Williams/flickr)

What Are Society and Culture?

Sociology is the study of groups and group interactions, societies and social interactions, from small and personal groups to very large groups. A group of people who live in a defined geographic area, who interact with one another, and who share a common culture is what sociologists call a **society**. Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society. Sociologists working from the **micro-level** study small groups and individual interactions, while those using **macro-level** analysis look at trends among and between large groups and societies. For example, a micro-level study might look at the accepted rules of conversation in various groups such as among teenagers or business professionals. In contrast, a macro-level analysis might research the ways that language use has changed over time or in social media outlets.

The term **culture** refers to the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs. Culture encompasses a group's way of life, from routine, everyday interactions to the most important parts of group members' lives. It includes everything produced by a society, including all of the social rules. Sociologists often study culture using the **sociological imagination**, which pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills described as an awareness of the relationship between a person's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions. It's a way of seeing our own and other people's behavior in relationship to history and social structure (1959).

One illustration of this is a person's decision to marry. In the United States, this choice is heavily influenced by individual feelings; however, the social acceptability of marriage relative to the person's circumstances also plays a part. Remember, though, that culture is a product of the people in a society; sociologists take care not to treat the concept of "culture" as though it were alive in its own right. **Reification** is an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence (Sahn 2013).

Studying Patterns: How Sociologists View Society

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures.

Changes in the U.S. family structure offer an example of patterns that sociologists are interested in studying. A "typical" family now is vastly different than in past decades when most U.S. families consisted of married parents living in a home with their unmarried children. The percent of unmarried couples, same-sex couples, single-parent and single-adult households is increasing, as well as is the number of expanded households, in which extended family members such as grandparents, cousins, or adult children live together in the family home (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

While mothers still make up the majority of single parents, millions of fathers are also raising their children alone, and more than 1 million of these single fathers have never been married (Williams Institute 2010; cited in Ludden 2012). Increasingly,

single men and women and cohabitating opposite-sex or same-sex couples are choosing to raise children outside of marriage through surrogates or adoption.

Some sociologists study **social facts**, which are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life, that may contribute to these changes in the family. Do people in the United States view marriage and family differently than before? Do employment and economic conditions play a role? How has culture influenced the choices that individuals make in living arrangements? Other sociologists are studying the consequences of these new patterns, such as the ways children are affected by them or changing needs for education, housing, and healthcare.

Modern U.S. families may be very different in structure from what was historically typical. (Photo courtesy of Tony Alter/Wikimedia Commons)

Another example of the way society influences individual decisions can be seen in people's opinions about and use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP benefits. Some people believe those who receive SNAP benefits are lazy and unmotivated. Statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture show a complex picture.

State	Population	Number Receiving SNAP	Percentage of residents receiving SNAP	Average Weekly Earnings
District of Columbia	601,723	135,796	22.6%	$1,667.00
Florida	18,801,310	3,664,055	19.5%	$852.00
Rhode Island	1,052,567	172,343	16.4%	$919.00
Ohio	11,536,504	1,627,589	14.1%	$878.00
Massachusetts	6,547,629	787,411	12.0%	$1,197.00
New Jersey	8,791,894	887,259	10.1%	$1,116.00
Wyoming	563,626	34,167	6.1%	$866.00
		National Average:	14.5%	$974.00

SNAP Use by State in 2005Sociologists examine social conditions in different states to explain differences in the number of people receiving SNAP benefits. (Sources:

U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Census Bureau, Food Research and Action Center, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

The percentage of the population receiving SNAP benefits is much higher in certain states than in others. Does this mean, if the stereotype above were applied, that people in some states are lazier and less motivated than those in other states? Sociologists study the economies in each state—comparing unemployment rates, food, energy costs, and other factors—to explain differences in social issues like this.

To identify social trends, sociologists also study how people use SNAP benefits and how people react to their use. Research has found that for many people from all classes, there is a strong stigma attached to the use of SNAP benefits. This stigma can prevent people who qualify for this type of assistance from using SNAP benefits. According to Hanson and Gundersen (2002), how strongly this stigma is felt is linked to the general economic climate. This illustrates how sociologists observe a pattern in society.

Sociologists identify and study patterns related to all kinds of contemporary social issues. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, the emergence of the Tea Party as a political faction, how Twitter has influenced everyday communication—these are all examples of topics that sociologists might explore.

Studying Part and Whole: How Sociologists View Social Structures

A key basis of the sociological perspective is the concept that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior **figuration**.

An application that makes this concept understandable is the practice of religion. While people experience their religions in a distinctly individual manner, religion exists in a larger social context. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by what government dictates, holidays, teachers, places of worship, rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and social pressures that influence that religious experience (Elias 1978).

Note:
Individual-Society Connections

When sociologist Nathan Kierns spoke to his friend Ashley (a pseudonym) about the move she and her partner had made from an urban center to a small Midwestern town, he was curious about how the social pressures placed on a lesbian couple differed from one community to the other. Ashley said that in the city they had been accustomed to getting looks and hearing comments when she and her partner walked hand in hand. Otherwise, she felt that they were at least being tolerated. There had been little to no outright discrimination.

Things changed when they moved to the small town for her partner's job. For the first time, Ashley found herself experiencing direct discrimination because of her sexual orientation. Some of it was particularly hurtful. Landlords would not rent to them. Ashley, who is a highly trained professional, had a great deal of difficulty finding a new job.

When Nathan asked Ashley if she and her partner became discouraged or bitter about this new situation, Ashley said that rather than letting it get to them, they decided to do something about it. Ashley approached groups at a local college and several churches in the area. Together they decided to form the town's first gay-straight alliance.

The alliance has worked successfully to educate their community about same-sex couples. It also worked to raise awareness about the kinds of discrimination that Ashley and her partner experienced in the town and how those could be eliminated. The alliance has become a strong advocacy group, and it is working to attain equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LBGT individuals.

Kierns observed that this is an excellent example of how negative social forces can result in a positive response from individuals to bring about social change (Kierns 2011).

Summary

Sociology is the systematic study of society and social interaction. In order to carry out their studies, sociologists identify cultural patterns and social forces and determine how they affect individuals and groups. They also develop ways to apply their findings to the real world.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem: Which of the following best describes sociology as a subject?

a. The study of individual behavior
b. The study of cultures
c. The study of society and social interaction
d. The study of economics

Solution:
Answers

C

Exercise:

Problem:

C. Wright Mills once said that sociologists need to develop a sociological _____ to study how society affects individuals.

a. culture
b. imagination
c. method
d. tool

Solution:
Answers

B

Exercise:

Problem:

A sociologist defines society as a group of people who reside in a defined area, share a culture, and who:

a. interact
b. work in the same industry
c. speak different languages
d. practice a recognized religion

Solution:
Answers

A

Exercise:

Problem: Seeing patterns means that a sociologist needs to be able to:

a. compare the behavior of individuals from different societies
b. compare one society to another
c. identify similarities in how social groups respond to social pressure
d. compare individuals to groups

Solution:
Answers

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

What do you think C. Wright Mills meant when he said that to be a sociologist, one had to develop a sociological imagination?

Exercise:

Problem:

Describe a situation in which a choice you made was influenced by societal pressures.

Further Research

Sociology is a broad discipline. Different kinds of sociologists employ various methods for exploring the relationship between individuals and society. Check out more about sociology at http://openstaxcollege.org/l/what-is-sociology.

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Glossary

culture
: a group's shared practices, values, and beliefs

figuration
: the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of an individual and the society that shapes that behavior

reification
: an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence

society
: a group of people who live in a defined geographical area who interact with one another and who share a common culture

sociological imagination
: the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular

sociology
: the systematic study of society and social interaction

The History of Sociology

- Explain why sociology emerged when it did
- Describe how sociology became a separate academic discipline

People have been thinking like sociologists long before sociology became a separate academic discipline: Plato and Aristotle, Confucius, Khaldun, and Voltaire all set the stage for modern sociology. (Photos (a),(b),(d) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; Photo (c) courtesy of Moumou82/Wikimedia Commons)

Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by the relationship between individuals and the societies to which they belong. Many topics studied in modern sociology were also studied by ancient philosophers in their desire to describe an ideal society, including theories of social conflict, economics, social cohesion, and power (Hannoum 2003).

In the thirteenth century, Ma Tuan-Lin, a Chinese historian, first recognized social dynamics as an underlying component of historical development in his seminal encyclopedia, *General Study of Literary Remains*. The next century saw the emergence of the historian some consider to be the world's first sociologist: Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) of Tunisia. He wrote about many topics of interest today, setting a foundation for both modern sociology and economics, including a theory of social conflict, a comparison of nomadic and sedentary life, a description of political

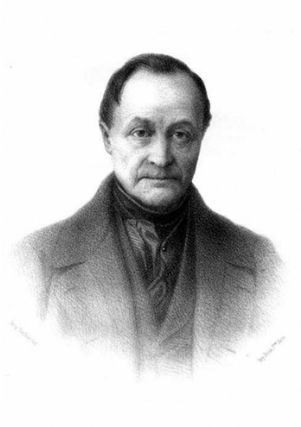
economy, and a study connecting a tribe’s social cohesion to its capacity for power (Hannoum 2003).

In the eighteenth century, Age of Enlightenment philosophers developed general principles that could be used to explain social life. Thinkers such as John Locke, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Hobbes responded to what they saw as social ills by writing on topics that they hoped would lead to social reform. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) wrote about women’s conditions in society. Her works were long ignored by the male academic structure, but since the 1970s, Wollstonecraft has been widely considered the first feminist thinker of consequence.

The early nineteenth century saw great changes with the Industrial Revolution, increased mobility, and new kinds of employment. It was also a time of great social and political upheaval with the rise of empires that exposed many people—for the first time—to societies and cultures other than their own. Millions of people moved into cities and many people turned away from their traditional religious beliefs.

Creating a Discipline

Auguste Comte (1798–1857)



Auguste

Comte played an important role in the development of sociology as a recognized discipline. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The term sociology was first coined in 1780 by the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) in an unpublished manuscript (Fauré et al. 1999). In 1838, the term was reinvented by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte originally studied to be an engineer, but later became a pupil of social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). They both thought that social scientists could study society using the same scientific methods utilized in natural sciences. Comte also believed in the potential of social scientists to work toward the betterment of society. He held that once scholars identified the laws that governed society, sociologists could address problems such as poor education and poverty (Abercrombie et al. 2000).

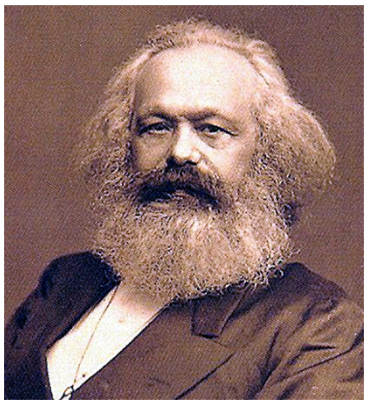
Comte named the scientific study of social patterns **positivism**. He described his philosophy in a series of books called *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842) and *A General View of Positivism* (1848). He believed that using scientific methods to reveal the laws by which societies and individuals interact would usher in a new “positivist” age of history. While the field and its terminology have grown, sociologists still believe in the positive impact of their work.

Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)—the First Woman Sociologist

Harriet Martineau was a writer who addressed a wide range of social science issues. She was an early observer of social practices, including economics, social class, religion, suicide, government, and women's rights. Her writing career began in 1832 with a series of stories titled *Illustrations of Political Economy*, in which she tried to educate ordinary people about the principles of economics (Johnson 2003).

Martineau was the first to translate Comte's writing from French to English and thereby introduced sociology to English-speaking scholars (Hill 1991). She is also credited with the first systematic methodological international comparisons of social institutions in two of her most famous sociological works: *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838). Martineau found the workings of capitalism at odds with the professed moral principles of people in the United States; she pointed out the faults with the free enterprise system in which workers were exploited and impoverished while business owners became wealthy. She further noted that the belief in all being created equal was inconsistent with the lack of women's rights. Much like Mary Wollstonecraft, Martineau was often discounted in her own time by the male domination of academic sociology.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)



Karl Marx was one of the founders of sociology. His ideas about social conflict are still relevant today. (Photo courtesy of John Mayall/Wikimedia Commons)

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher and economist. In 1848 he and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) coauthored the *Communist Manifesto*. This book is one of the most influential political manuscripts in history. It also presents Marx's theory of society, which differed from what Comte proposed.

Marx rejected Comte's positivism. He believed that societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production. At the time he was developing his theories, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism led to great disparities in wealth between the owners of the factories and workers. Capitalism, an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods and the means to produce them, grew in many nations.

Marx predicted that inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt. This would lead to the collapse of capitalism, which would be replaced by communism. Communism is an economic system under which there is no private or corporate ownership: everything is owned communally and distributed as needed. Marx believed that communism was a more equitable system than capitalism.

While his economic predictions may not have come true in the time frame he predicted, Marx’s idea that social conflict leads to change in society is

still one of the major theories used in modern sociology.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

In 1873, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer published *The Study of Sociology*, the first book with the term “sociology” in the title. Spencer rejected much of Comte’s philosophy as well as Marx's theory of class struggle and his support of communism. Instead, he favored a form of government that allowed market forces to control capitalism. His work influenced many early sociologists including Émile Durkheim (1858–1917).

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

Georg Simmel was a German art critic who wrote widely on social and political issues as well. Simmel took an anti-positivism stance and addressed topics such as social conflict, the function of money, individual identity in city life, and the European fear of outsiders (Stapley 2010). Much of his work focused on the micro-level theories, and it analyzed the dynamics of two-person and three-person groups. His work also emphasized individual culture as the creative capacities of individuals. Simmel’s contributions to sociology are not often included in academic histories of the discipline, perhaps overshadowed by his contemporaries Durkheim, Mead, and Weber (Ritzer and Goodman 2004).

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Durkheim helped establish sociology as a formal academic discipline by establishing the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895 and by publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method* in 1895. In another important work, *Division of Labour in Society* (1893), Durkheim laid out his theory on how societies transformed from a primitive

state into a capitalist, industrial society. According to Durkheim, people rise to their proper levels in society based on belief in a meritocracy.

Durkheim believed that sociologists could study objective “social facts” (Poggi 2000). He also believed that through such studies it would be possible to determine if a society was “healthy” or “pathological.” He saw healthy societies as stable, while pathological societies experienced a breakdown in social norms between individuals and society.

In 1897, Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of his rules of social research when he published a work titled *Suicide*. Durkheim examined suicide statistics in different police districts to research differences between Catholic and Protestant communities. He attributed the differences to socioreligious forces rather than to individual or psychological causes.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

George Herbert Mead was a philosopher and sociologist whose work focused on the ways in which the mind and the self were developed as a result of social processes (Cronk n.d.). He argued that how an individual comes to view himself or herself is based to a very large extent on interactions with others. Mead called specific individuals that impacted a person’s life **significant others,** and he also conceptualized “**generalized others**” as the organized and generalized attitude of a social group. Mead’s work is closely associated with the symbolic interactionist approach and emphasizes the micro-level of analysis.

Max Weber (1864–1920)

Prominent sociologist Max Weber established a sociology department in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in 1919. Weber wrote on many topics related to sociology including political change in Russia and social forces that affect factory workers. He is known best for

his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The theory that Weber sets forth in this book is still controversial. Some believe that Weber argued that the beliefs of many Protestants, especially Calvinists, led to the creation of capitalism. Others interpret it as simply claiming that the ideologies of capitalism and Protestantism are complementary.

Weber believed that it was difficult, if not impossible, to use standard scientific methods to accurately predict the behavior of groups as people hoped to do. They argued that the influence of culture on human behavior had to be taken into account. This even applied to the researchers themselves, who, they believed, should be aware of how their own cultural biases could influence their research. To deal with this problem, Weber and Dilthey introduced the concept of ***verstehen***, a German word that means to understand in a deep way. In seeking verstehen, outside observers of a social world—an entire culture or a small setting—attempt to understand it from an insider's point of view.

In his book *The Nature of Social Action* (1922), Weber described sociology as striving to "interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which action proceeds and the effects it produces." He and other like-minded sociologists proposed a philosophy of **antipositivism** whereby social researchers would strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values. This approach led to some research methods whose aim was not to generalize or predict (traditional in science), but to systematically gain an in-depth understanding of social worlds.

The different approaches to research based on positivism or antipositivism are often considered the foundation for the differences found today between quantitative sociology and qualitative sociology. **Quantitative sociology** uses statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants. Researchers analyze data using statistical techniques to see if they can uncover patterns of human behavior. **Qualitative sociology** seeks to understand human behavior by learning about it through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and analysis of content sources (like books, magazines, journals, and popular media).

Note:
Should We Raise the Minimum Wage?
In the 2014 State of the Union Address, President Obama called on Congress to raise the national minimum wage, and he signed an executive order putting this into effect for individuals working on new federal service contracts. Congress did not pass legislation to change the national minimum wage more broadly. The result has become a national controversy, with various economists taking different sides on the issue, and public protests being staged by several groups of minimum-wage workers.
Opponents of raising the minimum wage argue that some workers would get larger paychecks while others would lose their jobs, and companies would be less likely to hire new workers because of the increased cost of paying them (Bernstein 2014; cited in CNN).
Proponents of raising the minimum wage contend that some job loss would be greatly offset by the positive effects on the economy of low-wage workers having more income (Hassett 2014; cited in CNN).
Sociologists may consider the minimum wage issue from differing perspectives as well. How much of an impact would a minimum wage raise have for a single mother? Some might study the economic effects, such as her ability to pay bills and keep food on the table. Others might look at how reduced economic stress could improve family relationships. Some sociologists might research the impact on the status of small business owners. These could all be examples of public sociology, a branch of sociology that strives to bring sociological dialogue to public forums. The goals of public sociology are to increase understanding of the social factors that underlie social problems and assist in finding solutions. According to Michael Burawoy (2005), the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways.

Summary

Sociology was developed as a way to study and try to understand the changes to society brought on by the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of the earliest sociologists thought that

societies and individuals' roles in society could be studied using the same scientific methodologies that were used in the natural sciences, while others believed that is was impossible to predict human behavior scientifically, and still others debated the value of such predictions. Those perspectives continue to be represented within sociology today.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

Which of the following was a topic of study in early sociology?

a. Astrology
b. Economics
c. Physics
d. History

Solution:
Answers

B

Exercise:

Problem:

Which founder of sociology believed societies changed due to class struggle?

a. Émile Comte
b. Karl Marx
c. Plato
d. Herbert Spencer

Solution:

Answers

B

Exercise:

Problem:

The difference between positivism and antipositivism relates to:

a. whether individuals like or dislike their society
b. whether research methods use statistical data or person-to-person research
c. whether sociological studies can predict or improve society
d. all of the above

Solution:
Answers

C

Exercise:

Problem: Which would a quantitative sociologists use to gather data?

a. A large survey
b. A literature search
c. An in-depth interview
d. A review of television programs

Solution:
Answers

A

Exercise:

Problem:

Weber believed humans could not be studied purely objectively because they were influenced by:

a. drugs
b. their culture
c. their genetic makeup
d. the researcher

Solution:
Answers

B

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

What do you make of Karl Marx's contributions to sociology? What perceptions of Marx have you been exposed to in your society, and how do those perceptions influence your views?

Exercise:

Problem:

Do you tend to place more value on qualitative or quantitative research? Why? Does it matter what topic you are studying?

Further Research

Many sociologists helped shape the discipline. To learn more about prominent sociologists and how they changed sociology check out http://www.macionis.com/gallery-of-sociologists/ferdinand-toennies/.

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Glossary

antipositivism
: the view that social researchers should strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values

generalized others
: the organized and generalized attitude of a social group

positivism
: the scientific study of social patterns

qualitative sociology
: in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or analysis of content sources as the source of its data

quantitative sociology
: statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants

significant others
: specific individuals that impact a person's life

verstehen

a German word that means to understand in a deep way

Theoretical Perspectives

- Explain what sociological theories are and how they are used
- Understand the similarities and differences between structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

Sociologists develop theories to explain social occurrences such as protest rallies. (Photo courtesy of voanews.com/Wikimedia Commons)

Sociologists study social events, interactions, and patterns, and they develop a theory in an attempt to explain why things work as they do. In sociology, a **theory** is a way to explain different aspects of social interactions and to create a testable proposition, called a **hypothesis,** about society (Allan 2006).

For example, although suicide is generally considered an individual phenomenon, Émile Durkheim was interested in studying the social factors that affect it. His studied social ties within a group, or **social solidarity**, and hypothesized that differences in suicide rates might be explained by religion-based differences. Durkheim gathered a large amount of data about Europeans who had ended their lives, and he did indeed find differences

based on religion. Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics in Durkheim's society, and his work supports the utility of theory in sociological research.

Theories vary in scope depending on the scale of the issues that they are meant to explain. Macro-level theories relate to large-scale issues and large groups of people, while micro-level theories look at very specific relationships between individuals or small groups. **Grand theories** attempt to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change. Sociological theory is constantly evolving and should never be considered complete. Classic sociological theories are still considered important and current, but new sociological theories build upon the work of their predecessors and add to them (Calhoun 2002).

In sociology, a few theories provide broad perspectives that help explain many different aspects of social life, and these are called paradigms. **Paradigms** are philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in support of them. Three paradigms have come to dominate sociological thinking, because they provide useful explanations: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Sociological Paradigm	**Level of Analysis**	**Focus**
Structural Functionalism	Macro or mid	The way each part of society functions together to contribute to the whole

Sociological Paradigm	Level of Analysis	Focus
Conflict Theory	Macro	The way inequalities contribute to social differences and perpetuate differences in power
Symbolic Interactionism	Micro	One-to-one interactions and communications

Sociological Theories or PerspectivesDifferent sociological perspectives enable sociologists to view social issues through a variety of useful lenses.

Functionalism

Functionalism, also called structural-functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist, Hebert Spencer (1820–1903), who saw similarities between society and the human body; he argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning (Spencer 1898). The parts of society that Spencer referred to were the **social institutions,** or patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs, such as government, education, family, healthcare, religion, and the economy.

Émile Durkheim, another early sociologist, applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability (Durkheim 1893), and that society is held together by shared values, languages, and symbols. He believed that to study society, a sociologist must look beyond individuals to social facts such as laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashion, and rituals, which all serve to govern social life. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) defined the **function** of any recurrent activity as the part it played in social

life as a whole, and therefore the contribution it makes to social stability and continuity (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). In a healthy society, all parts work together to maintain stability, a state called **dynamic equilibrium** by later sociologists such as Parsons (1961).

Durkheim believed that individuals may make up society, but in order to study society, sociologists have to look beyond individuals to social facts. **Social facts** are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life (Durkheim 1895). Each of these social facts serves one or more functions within a society. For example, one function of a society's laws may be to protect society from violence, while another is to punish criminal behavior, while another is to preserve public health.

Another noted structural functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions. **Manifest functions** are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated, while **latent functions** are the unsought consequences of a social process. A manifest function of college education, for example, includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Another latent function of education is creating a hierarchy of employment based on the level of education attained. Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called **dysfunctions**. In education, examples of dysfunction include getting bad grades, truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and not finding suitable employment.

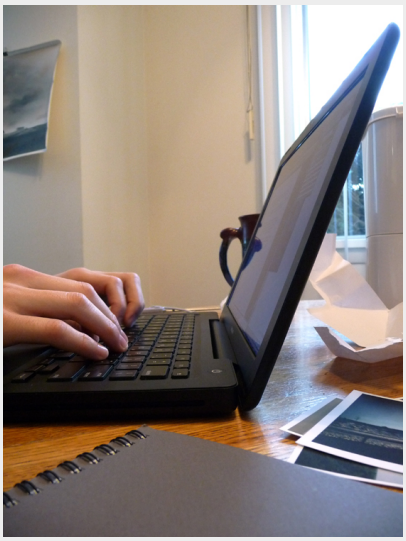
Criticism

One criticism of the structural-functional theory is that it can't adequately explain social change. Also problematic is the somewhat circular nature of this theory; repetitive behavior patterns are assumed to have a function, yet we profess to know that they have a function only because they are repeated. Furthermore, dysfunctions may continue, even though they don't

serve a function, which seemingly contradicts the basic premise of the theory. Many sociologists now believe that functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve a useful purpose in some mid-level analyses.

Note:

A Global Culture?



Some sociologists see the online world contributing to the creation of an emerging global culture. Are you a part of any global communities? (Photo courtesy of quasireversible/flickr)

Sociologists around the world look closely for signs of what would be an unprecedented event: the emergence of a global culture. In the past, empires such as those that existed in China, Europe, Africa, and Central

and South America linked people from many different countries, but those people rarely became part of a common culture. They lived too far from each other, spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and traded few goods. Today, increases in communication, travel, and trade have made the world a much smaller place. More and more people are able to communicate with each other instantly—wherever they are located—by telephone, video, and text. They share movies, television shows, music, games, and information over the Internet. Students can study with teachers and pupils from the other side of the globe. Governments find it harder to hide conditions inside their countries from the rest of the world. Sociologists research many different aspects of this potential global culture. Some explore the dynamics involved in the social interactions of global online communities, such as when members feel a closer kinship to other group members than to people residing in their own countries. Other sociologists study the impact this growing international culture has on smaller, less-powerful local cultures. Yet other researchers explore how international markets and the outsourcing of labor impact social inequalities. Sociology can play a key role in people's abilities to understand the nature of this emerging global culture and how to respond to it.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory looks at society as a competition for limited resources. This perspective is a macro-level approach most identified with the writings of German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx (1818–1883), who saw society as being made up of individuals in different social classes who must compete for social, material, and political resources such as food and housing, employment, education, and leisure time. Social institutions like government, education, and religion reflect this competition in their inherent inequalities and help maintain the unequal social structure. Some individuals and organizations are able to obtain and keep more resources than others, and these “winners” use their power and influence to maintain social institutions. Several theorist suggested variations on this basic theme.

Polish-Austrian sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838–1909) expanded on Marx's ideas by arguing that war and conquest are the basis of civilizations. He believed that cultural and ethnic conflicts led to states being identified and defined by a dominant group that had power over other groups (Irving 2007).

German sociologist Max Weber agreed with Marx but also believed that, in addition to economic inequalities, inequalities of political power and social structure cause conflict. Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender, and that people's reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power.

German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) believed that conflict can help integrate and stabilize a society. He said that the intensity of the conflict varies depending on the emotional involvement of the parties, the degree of solidarity within the opposing groups, and the clarity and limited nature of the goals. Simmel also showed that groups work to create internal solidarity, centralize power, and reduce dissent. Resolving conflicts can reduce tension and hostility and can pave the way for future agreements.

In the 1930s and 1940s, German philosophers, known as the Frankfurt School, developed critical theory as an elaboration on Marxist principles. Critical theory is an expansion of conflict theory and is broader than just sociology, including other social sciences and philosophy. A critical theory attempts to address structural issues causing inequality; it must explain what's wrong in current social reality, identify the people who can make changes, and provide practical goals for social transformation (Horkeimer 1982).

More recently, inequality based on gender or race has been explained in a similar manner and has identified institutionalized power structures that help to maintain inequality between groups. Janet Saltzman Chafetz (1941–2006) presented a model of feminist theory that attempts to explain the forces that maintain gender inequality as well as a theory of how such a system can be changed (Turner 2003). Similarly, critical race theory grew out of a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view.

Critical race theory looks at structural inequality based on white privilege and associated wealth, power, and prestige.

Criticism

Note:
Farming and Locavores: How Sociological Perspectives Might View Food Consumption
The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence, yet it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Any of these factors might become a topic of sociological study.
A structural-functional approach to the topic of food consumption might be interested in the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another examination might study the different functions that occur in food production: from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism.
A conflict theorist might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food, by exploring where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit and how the government mediates those interests. Or a conflict theorist might be interested in the power and powerlessness experienced by local farmers versus large farming conglomerates, such as the documentary *Food Inc.* depicts as resulting from Monsanto's patenting of seed technology. Another topic of study might be how nutrition varies between different social classes.
A sociologist viewing food consumption through a symbolic interactionist lens would be more interested in micro-level topics, such as the symbolic use of food in religious rituals, or the role it plays in the social interaction of a family dinner. This perspective might also study the interactions among group members who identify themselves based on their sharing a

particular diet, such as vegetarians (people who don’t eat meat) or locavores (people who strive to eat locally produced food).

Just as structural functionalism was criticized for focusing too much on the stability of societies, conflict theory has been criticized because it tends to focus on conflict to the exclusion of recognizing stability. Many social structures are extremely stable or have gradually progressed over time rather than changing abruptly as conflict theory would suggest.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that focuses on the relationships among individuals within a society. Communication—the exchange of meaning through language and symbols—is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds. Theorists Herman and Reynolds (1994) note that this perspective sees people as being active in shaping the social world rather than simply being acted upon.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism though he never published his work on it (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Mead’s student, Herbert Blumer, coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances (Blumer 1969). If you love books, for example, a symbolic interactionist might propose that you learned that books are good or important in the interactions you had with family, friends, school, or church; maybe your family had a special reading time each week, getting your library card was treated as a special event, or bedtime stories were associated with warmth and comfort.

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict

theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message. The focus on the importance of symbols in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922–1982) to develop a technique called **dramaturgical analysis**. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural "scripts." Because it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, he or she has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman 1958).

Studies that use the symbolic interactionist perspective are more likely to use qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, because they seek to understand the symbolic worlds in which research subjects live.

Constructivism is an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be. We develop social constructs based on interactions with others, and those constructs that last over time are those that have meanings which are widely agreed-upon or generally accepted by most within the society. This approach is often used to understand what's defined as deviant within a society. There is no absolute definition of deviance, and different societies have constructed different meanings for deviance, as well as associating different behaviors with deviance. One situation that illustrates this is what you believe you're to do if you find a wallet in the street. In the United States, turning the wallet in to local authorities would be considered the appropriate action, and to keep the wallet would be seen as deviant. In contrast, many Eastern societies would consider it much more appropriate to keep the wallet and search for the owner yourself; turning it over to someone else, even the authorities, would be considered deviant behavior.

Criticism

Research done from this perspective is often scrutinized because of the difficulty of remaining objective. Others criticize the extremely narrow

focus on symbolic interaction. Proponents, of course, consider this one of its greatest strengths.

Sociological Theory Today

These three approaches are still the main foundation of modern sociological theory, but some evolution has been seen. Structural-functionalism was a dominant force after World War II and until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, sociologists began to feel that structural-functionalism did not sufficiently explain the rapid social changes happening in the United States at that time.

Conflict theory then gained prominence, as there was renewed emphasis on institutionalized social inequality. Critical theory, and the particular aspects of feminist theory and critical race theory, focused on creating social change through the application of sociological principles, and the field saw a renewed emphasis on helping ordinary people understand sociology principles, in the form of public sociology.

Postmodern social theory attempts to look at society through an entirely new lens by rejecting previous macro-level attempts to explain social phenomena. Generally considered as gaining acceptance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, postmodern social theory is a micro-level approach that looks at small, local groups and individual reality. Its growth in popularity coincides with the constructivist aspects of symbolic interactionism.

Summary

Sociologists develop theories to explain social events, interactions, and patterns. A theory is a proposed explanation of those social interactions. Theories have different scales. Macro-level theories, such as structural functionalism and conflict theory, attempt to explain how societies operate as a whole. Micro-level theories, such as symbolic interactionism, focus on interactions between individuals.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

Which of these theories is most likely to look at the social world on a micro level?

a. Structural functionalism
b. Conflict theory
c. Positivism
d. Symbolic interactionism

Solution:

D

Exercise:

Problem:

Who believed that the history of society was one of class struggle?

a. Émile Durkheim
b. Karl Marx
c. Erving Goffmann
d. George Herbert Mead

Solution:

B

Exercise:

Problem: Who coined the phrase symbolic interactionism?

a. Herbert Blumer

b. Max Weber
c. Lester F. Ward
d. W. I. Thomas

Solution:

A

Exercise:

Problem:

A symbolic interactionist may compare social interactions to:

a. behaviors
b. conflicts
c. human organs
d. theatrical roles

Solution:

D

Exercise:

Problem:

Which research technique would most likely be used by a symbolic interactionist?

a. Surveys
b. Participant observation
c. Quantitative data analysis
d. None of the above

Solution:

B

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Which theory do you think better explains how societies operate—structural functionalism or conflict theory? Why?

Exercise:

Problem:

Do you think the way people behave in social interactions is more like the behavior of animals or more like actors playing a role in a theatrical production? Why?

Further Research

People often think of all conflict as violent, but many conflicts can be resolved nonviolently. To learn more about nonviolent methods of conflict resolution check out the Albert Einstein Institution http://openstaxcollege.org/l/ae-institution

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Glossary

conflict theory
: a theory that looks at society as a competition for limited resources

constructivism
: an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be

dramaturgical analysis
: a technique sociologists use in which they view society through the metaphor of theatrical performance

dynamic equilibrium
: a stable state in which all parts of a healthy society work together properly

dysfunctions

social patterns that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society

function
: the part a recurrent activity plays in the social life as a whole and the contribution it makes to structural continuity

functionalism
: a theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of individuals that make up that society

grand theories
: an attempt to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change

hypothesis
: a testable proposition

latent functions
: the unrecognized or unintended consequences of a social process

macro-level
: a wide-scale view of the role of social structures within a society

manifest functions
: sought consequences of a social process

micro-level theories
: the study of specific relationships between individuals or small groups

paradigms
: philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in support of them

social facts

the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life

social institutions
: patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs

social solidarity
: the social ties that bind a group of people together such as kinship, shared location, and religion

symbolic interactionism
: a theoretical perspective through which scholars examine the relationship of individuals within their society by studying their communication (language and symbols)

theory
: a proposed explanation about social interactions or society

Why Study Sociology?

- Explain why it is worthwhile to study sociology
- Identify ways sociology is applied in the real world

The research of sociologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark helped the Supreme Court decide to end "separate but equal" racial segregation in schools in the United States. (Photo courtesy of public domain)

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd. But she knew she had the law on her side. Three years earlier in the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned twenty-one state laws that allowed blacks and whites to be taught in separate school systems as long as the school systems were "equal." One of the major factors influencing that decision was research conducted by the husband-and-wife team of sociologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their research showed that segregation was harmful to young black schoolchildren, and the Court found that harm to be unconstitutional.

Since it was first founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this field, while others have seen it as way not only to study society but also to improve it. Besides desegregation, sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms, such as equal opportunity for women in the workplace, improved treatment for individuals with mental handicaps or learning disabilities, increased accessibility and accommodation for people with physical handicaps, the right of native populations to preserve their land and culture, and prison system reforms.

The prominent sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929–), in his 1963 book *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, describes a sociologist as "someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way." He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people's lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the "aha" moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood:

"[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology. (Berger 1963)"

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to different groups based on the many different ways they classify themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications—such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—affect perceptions.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many different kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.

Sociology in the Workplace

Employers continue to seek people with what are called “transferable skills.” This means that they want to hire people whose knowledge and education can be applied in a variety of settings and whose skills will contribute to various tasks. Studying sociology can provide people with this wide knowledge and a skill set that can contribute to many workplaces, including

> - an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies;
> - the ability to devise and carry out research projects to assess whether a program or policy is working;
> - the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information from polls or surveys;
> - the ability to recognize important differences in people’s social, cultural, and economic backgrounds;
> - skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas; and

> - the capacity for critical thinking about social issues and problems that confront modern society. (Department of Sociology, University of Alabama)

Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers. Besides actually conducting social research or training others in the field, people who graduate from college with a degree in sociology are hired by government agencies and corporations in fields such as social services, counseling (e.g., family planning, career, substance abuse), community planning, health services, marketing, market research, and human resources. Even a small amount of training in sociology can be an asset in careers like sales, public relations, journalism, teaching, law, and criminal justice.

Note:
Please “Friend” Me: Students and Social Networking
The phenomenon known as Facebook was designed specifically for students. Whereas earlier generations wrote notes in each other’s printed yearbooks at the end of the academic year, modern technology and the Internet ushered in dynamic new ways for people to interact socially. Instead of having to meet up on campus, students can call, text, and Skype from their dorm rooms. Instead of a study group gathering weekly in the library, online forums and chat rooms help learners connect. The availability and immediacy of computer technology has forever changed the ways in which students engage with each other.
Now, after several social networks have vied for primacy, a few have established their place in the market and some have attracted niche audience. While Facebook launched the social networking trend geared toward teens and young adults, now people of all ages are actively “friending” each other. LinkedIn distinguished itself by focusing on professional connections and served as a virtual world for workplace networking. Newer offshoots like Foursquare help people connect based on the real-world places they frequent, while Twitter has cornered the market on brevity.

The widespread ownership of smartphones adds to this social experience; the Pew Research Center (2012) found that the majority of people in the United States with mobile phones now have “smart” phones with Internet capability. Many people worldwide can now access Facebook, Twitter, and other social media from virtually anywhere, and there seems to be an increasing acceptance of smartphone use in many diverse and previously prohibited settings. The outcomes of smartphone use, as with other social media, are not yet clear.

These newer modes of social interaction have also spawned harmful consequences, such as cyberbullying and what some call FAD, or Facebook Addiction Disorder. Researchers have also examined other potential negative impacts, such as whether Facebooking lowers a student’s GPA, or whether there might be long-term effects of replacing face-to-face interaction with social media.

All of these social networks demonstrate emerging ways that people interact, whether positive or negative. They illustrate how sociological topics are alive and changing today. Social media will most certainly be a developing topic in the study of sociology for decades to come.

Summary

Studying sociology is beneficial both for the individual and for society. By studying sociology people learn how to think critically about social issues and problems that confront our society. The study of sociology enriches students’ lives and prepares them for careers in an increasingly diverse world. Society benefits because people with sociological training are better prepared to make informed decisions about social issues and take effective action to deal with them.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

Kenneth and Mamie Clark used sociological research to show that segregation was:

a. beneficial
b. harmful
c. illegal
d. of no importance

Solution:

B

Exercise:

Problem:

Studying sociology helps people analyze data because they learn:

a. interview techniques
b. to apply statistics
c. to generate theories
d. all of the above

Solution:

D

Exercise:

Problem: Berger describes sociologists as concerned with:

a. monumental moments in people’s lives
b. common everyday life events
c. both a and b
d. none of the above

Solution:

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

How do you think taking a sociology course might affect your social interactions?

Exercise:

Problem:

What sort of career are you interested in? How could studying sociology help you in this career?

Further Research

Social communication is rapidly evolving due to ever improving technologies. To learn more about how sociologists study the impact of these changes check out http://openstaxcollege.org/l/media

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Introduction to Sociological Research
class="introduction"

Many believe that crime rates go up during the full moon, but scientific research does not support this conclusion. (Photo courtesy of Jubula 2/flickr)

Have you ever wondered if home schooling affects a person's later success in college or how many people wait until they are in their forties to get married? Do you wonder if texting is changing teenagers' abilities to spell correctly or to communicate clearly? How do social movements like Occupy Wall Street develop? How about the development of social phenomena like the massive public followings for Star Trek and Harry Potter? The goal of research is to answer questions. Sociological research attempts to answer a vast variety of questions, such as these and more, about our social world.

We often have opinions about social situations, but these may be biased by our expectations or based on limited data. Instead, scientific research is based on **empirical evidence**, which is evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation. Many people believe, for example, that crime rates go up when there's a full moon, but research doesn't support this opinion. Researchers Rotton and Kelly (1985) conducted a **meta-analysis** of research on the full moon's effects on

behavior. Meta-analysis is a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together. Rotton and Kelly's meta-analysis included thirty-seven prior studies on the effects of the full moon on crime rates, and the overall findings were that full moons are entirely unrelated to crime, suicide, psychiatric problems, and crisis center calls (cited in Arkowitz and Lilienfeld 2009). We may each know of an instance in which a crime happened during a full moon, but it was likely just a coincidence.

People commonly try to understand the happenings in their world by finding or creating an explanation for an occurrence. Social scientists may develop a **hypothesis** for the same reason. A hypothesis is a testable educated guess about predicted outcomes between two or more variables; it's a possible explanation for specific happenings in the social world and allows for testing to determine whether the explanation holds true in many instances, as well as among various groups or in different places. Sociologists use empirical data and the **scientific method**, or an interpretative framework, to increase understanding of societies and social interactions, but research begins with the search for an answer to a question.

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Glossary

empirical evidence
: evidence that comes from direct experience, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation

meta-analysis

: a technique in which the results of virtually all previous studies on a specific subject are evaluated together

Approaches to Sociological Research

- Define and describe the scientific method
- Explain how the scientific method is used in sociological research
- Understand the function and importance of an interpretive framework
- Define what reliability and validity mean in a research study

When sociologists apply the sociological perspective and begin to ask questions, no topic is off limits. Every aspect of human behavior is a source of possible investigation. Sociologists question the world that humans have created and live in. They notice patterns of behavior as people move through that world. Using sociological methods and systematic research within the framework of the scientific method and a scholarly interpretive perspective, sociologists have discovered workplace patterns that have transformed industries, family patterns that have enlightened family members, and education patterns that have aided structural changes in classrooms.

The crime during a full moon discussion put forth a few loosely stated opinions. If the human behaviors around those claims were tested systematically, a police officer, for example, could write a report and offer the findings to sociologists and the world in general. The new perspective could help people understand themselves and their neighbors and help people make better decisions about their lives. It might seem strange to use scientific practices to study social trends, but, as we shall see, it’s extremely helpful to rely on systematic approaches that research methods provide.

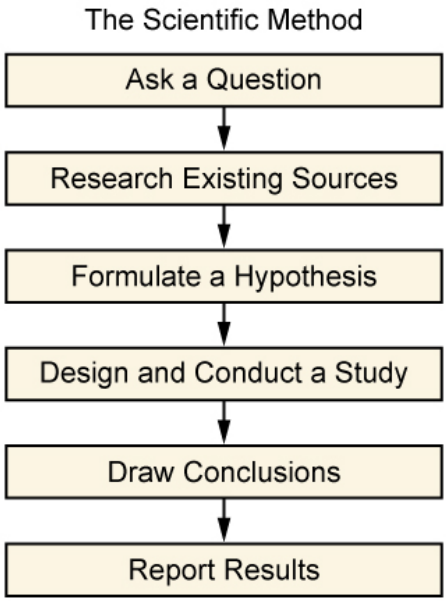
Sociologists often begin the research process by asking a question about how or why things happen in this world. It might be a unique question about a new trend or an old question about a common aspect of life. Once the sociologist forms the question, he or she proceeds through an in-depth process to answer it. In deciding how to design that process, the researcher may adopt a scientific approach or an interpretive framework. The following sections describe these approaches to knowledge.

The Scientific Method

Sociologists make use of tried and true methods of research, such as experiments, surveys, and field research. But humans and their social interactions are so diverse that these interactions can seem impossible to chart or explain. It might seem that science is about discoveries and chemical reactions or about proving ideas right or wrong rather than about exploring the nuances of human behavior.

However, this is exactly why scientific models work for studying human behavior. A scientific process of research establishes parameters that help make sure results are objective and accurate. Scientific methods provide limitations and boundaries that focus a study and organize its results.

The scientific method involves developing and testing theories about the world based on empirical evidence. It is defined by its commitment to systematic observation of the empirical world and strives to be objective, critical, skeptical, and logical. It involves a series of prescribed steps that have been established over centuries of scholarship.



The scientific method is an essential tool in research.

But just because sociological studies use scientific methods does not make the results less human. Sociological topics are not reduced to right or wrong facts. In this field, results of studies tend to provide people with access to knowledge they did not have before—knowledge of other cultures, knowledge of rituals and beliefs, or knowledge of trends and attitudes. No matter what research approach they use, researchers want to maximize the study's **reliability**, which refers to how likely research results are to be replicated if the study is reproduced. Reliability increases the likelihood that what happens to one person will happen to all people in a group. Researchers also strive for **validity**, which refers to how well the study measures what it was designed to measure. Returning to the crime rate during a full moon topic, reliability of a study would reflect how well the resulting experience represents the average adult crime rate during a full moon. Validity would ensure that the study's design accurately examined what it was designed to study, so an exploration of adult criminal behaviors during a full moon should address that issue and not veer into other age groups' crimes, for example.

In general, sociologists tackle questions about the role of social characteristics in outcomes. For example, how do different communities fare in terms of psychological well-being, community cohesiveness, range of vocation, wealth, crime rates, and so on? Are communities functioning smoothly? Sociologists look between the cracks to discover obstacles to meeting basic human needs. They might study environmental influences and patterns of behavior that lead to crime, substance abuse, divorce, poverty, unplanned pregnancies, or illness. And, because sociological studies are not all focused on negative behaviors or challenging situations, researchers might study vacation trends, healthy eating habits, neighborhood organizations, higher education patterns, games, parks, and exercise habits.

Sociologists can use the scientific method not only to collect but also to interpret and analyze the data. They deliberately apply scientific logic and objectivity. They are interested in—but not attached to—the results. They work outside of their own political or social agendas. This doesn't mean

researchers do not have their own personalities, complete with preferences and opinions. But sociologists deliberately use the scientific method to maintain as much objectivity, focus, and consistency as possible in a particular study.

With its systematic approach, the scientific method has proven useful in shaping sociological studies. The scientific method provides a systematic, organized series of steps that help ensure objectivity and consistency in exploring a social problem. They provide the means for accuracy, reliability, and validity. In the end, the scientific method provides a shared basis for discussion and analysis (Merton 1963).

Typically, the scientific method starts with these steps—1) ask a question, 2) research existing sources, 3) formulate a hypothesis—described below.

Ask a Question

The first step of the scientific method is to ask a question, describe a problem, and identify the specific area of interest. The topic should be narrow enough to study within a geography and time frame. “Are societies capable of sustained happiness?” would be too vague. The question should also be broad enough to have universal merit. “What do personal hygiene habits reveal about the values of students at XYZ High School?” would be too narrow. That said, happiness and hygiene are worthy topics to study. Sociologists do not rule out any topic, but would strive to frame these questions in better research terms.

That is why sociologists are careful to define their terms. In a hygiene study, for instance, hygiene could be defined as “personal habits to maintain physical appearance (as opposed to health),” and a researcher might ask, “How do differing personal hygiene habits reflect the cultural value placed on appearance?” When forming these basic research questions, sociologists develop an **operational definition**, that is, they define the concept in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it. The operational definition identifies an observable condition of the concept. By

operationalizing a variable of the concept, all researchers can collect data in a systematic or replicable manner.

The operational definition must be valid, appropriate, and meaningful. And it must be reliable, meaning that results will be close to uniform when tested on more than one person. For example, “good drivers” might be defined in many ways: those who use their turn signals, those who don’t speed, or those who courteously allow others to merge. But these driving behaviors could be interpreted differently by different researchers and could be difficult to measure. Alternatively, “a driver who has never received a traffic violation” is a specific description that will lead researchers to obtain the same information, so it is an effective operational definition.

Research Existing Sources

The next step researchers undertake is to conduct background research through a **literature review**, which is a review of any existing similar or related studies. A visit to the library and a thorough online search will uncover existing research about the topic of study. This step helps researchers gain a broad understanding of work previously conducted on the topic at hand and enables them to position their own research to build on prior knowledge. Researchers—including student researchers—are responsible for correctly citing existing sources they use in a study or that inform their work. While it is fine to borrow previously published material (as long as it enhances a unique viewpoint), it must be referenced properly and never plagiarized.

To study hygiene and its value in a particular society, a researcher might sort through existing research and unearth studies about child-rearing, vanity, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and cultural attitudes toward beauty. It’s important to sift through this information and determine what is relevant. Using existing sources educates researchers and helps refine and improve studies' designs.

Formulate a Hypothesis

A **hypothesis** is an assumption about how two or more variables are related; it makes a conjectural statement about the relationship between those variables. In sociology, the hypothesis will often predict how one form of human behavior influences another. In research, **independent variables** are the *cause* of the change. The **dependent variable** is the *effect*, or thing that is changed.

For example, in a basic study, the researcher would establish one form of human behavior as the independent variable and observe the influence it has on a dependent variable. How does gender (the independent variable) affect rate of income (the dependent variable)? How does one's religion (the independent variable) affect family size (the dependent variable)? How is social class (the dependent variable) affected by level of education (the independent variable)?

Hypothesis	**Independent Variable**	**Dependent Variable**
The greater the availability of affordable housing, the lower the homeless rate.	Affordable Housing	Homeless Rate
The greater the availability of math tutoring, the higher the math grades.	Math Tutoring	Math Grades
The greater the police patrol presence, the safer the neighborhood.	Police Patrol Presence	Safer Neighborhood

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable
The greater the factory lighting, the higher the productivity.	Factory Lighting	Productivity
The greater the amount of observation, the higher the public awareness.	Observation	Public Awareness

Examples of Dependent and Independent VariablesTypically, the independent variable causes the dependent variable to change in some way.

At this point, a researcher's operational definitions help measure the variables. In a study asking how tutoring improves grades, for instance, one researcher might define a "good" grade as a C or better, while another uses a B+ as a starting point for "good." Another operational definition might describe "tutoring" as "one-on-one assistance by an expert in the field, hired by an educational institution." Those definitions set limits and establish cut-off points that ensure consistency and replicability in a study.

As the table shows, an independent variable is the one that causes a dependent variable to change. For example, a researcher might hypothesize that teaching children proper hygiene (the independent variable) will boost their sense of self-esteem (the dependent variable). Or rephrased, a child's sense of self-esteem depends, in part, on the quality and availability of hygienic resources.

Of course, this hypothesis can also work the other way around. Perhaps a sociologist believes that increasing a child's sense of self-esteem (the independent variable) will automatically increase or improve habits of hygiene (now the dependent variable). Identifying the independent and dependent variables is very important. As the hygiene example shows, simply identifying two topics, or variables, is not enough; their prospective relationship must be part of the hypothesis.

Just because a sociologist forms an educated prediction of a study's outcome doesn't mean data contradicting the hypothesis aren't welcome. Sociologists analyze general patterns in response to a study, but they are equally interested in exceptions to patterns. In a study of education, a researcher might predict that high school dropouts have a hard time finding rewarding careers. While it has become at least a cultural assumption that the higher the education, the higher the salary and degree of career happiness, there are certainly exceptions. People with little education have had stunning careers, and people with advanced degrees have had trouble finding work. A sociologist prepares a hypothesis knowing that results will vary.

Once the preliminary work is done, it's time for the next research steps: designing and conducting a study and drawing conclusions. These research methods are discussed below.

Interpretive Framework

While many sociologists rely on the scientific method as a research approach, others operate from an **interpretive framework**. While systematic, this approach doesn't follow the hypothesis-testing model that seeks to find generalizable results. Instead, an *interpretive framework*, sometimes referred to as an interpretive perspective, seeks to understand social worlds from the point of view of participants, which leads to in-depth knowledge.

Interpretive research is generally more descriptive or narrative in its findings. Rather than formulating a hypothesis and method for testing it, an interpretive researcher will develop approaches to explore the topic at hand that may involve a significant amount of direct observation or interaction with subjects. This type of researcher also learns as he or she proceeds and sometimes adjusts the research methods or processes midway to optimize findings as they evolve.

Summary

Using the scientific method, a researcher conducts a study in five phases: asking a question, researching existing sources, formulating a hypothesis, conducting a study, and drawing conclusions. The scientific method is useful in that it provides a clear method of organizing a study. Some sociologists conduct research through an interpretive framework rather than employing the scientific method.

Scientific sociological studies often observe relationships between variables. Researchers study how one variable changes another. Prior to conducting a study, researchers are careful to apply operational definitions to their terms and to establish dependent and independent variables.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

A measurement is considered _____ if it actually measures what it is intended to measure, according to the topic of the study.

a. reliable
b. sociological
c. valid
d. quantitative

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

Sociological studies test relationships in which change in one _____ causes change in another.

a. test subject
b. behavior
c. variable
d. operational definition

Solution:
Answers

C

Exercise:

Problem:

In a study, a group of ten-year-old boys are fed doughnuts every morning for a week and then weighed to see how much weight they gained. Which factor is the dependent variable?

a. The doughnuts
b. The boys
c. The duration of a week
d. The weight gained

Solution:
Answers

D

Exercise:

Problem:

Which statement provides the best operational definition of “childhood obesity”?

a. Children who eat unhealthy foods and spend too much time watching television and playing video games

b. A distressing trend that can lead to health issues including type 2 diabetes and heart disease
c. Body weight at least 20 percent higher than a healthy weight for a child of that height
d. The tendency of children today to weigh more than children of earlier generations

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Solution:
Answers

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Write down the first three steps of the scientific method. Think of a broad topic that you are interested in and which would make a good sociological study—for example, ethnic diversity in a college, homecoming rituals, athletic scholarships, or teen driving. Now, take that topic through the first steps of the process. For each step, write a few sentences or a paragraph: 1) Ask a question about the topic. 2) Do some research and write down the titles of some articles or books you'd want to read about the topic. 3) Formulate a hypothesis.

Further Research

For a historical perspective on the scientific method in sociology, read "The Elements of Scientific Method in Sociology" by F. Stuart Chapin (1914) in the *American Journal of Sociology*: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Method-in-Sociology

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Glossary

dependent variables
: a variable changed by other variables

hypothesis
: a testable educated guess about predicted outcomes between two or more variables

independent variables
: variables that cause changes in dependent variables

interpretive framework
: a sociological research approach that seeks in-depth understanding of a topic or subject through observation or interaction; this approach is not based on hypothesis testing

literature review
: a scholarly research step that entails identifying and studying all existing studies on a topic to create a basis for new research

operational definitions
: specific explanations of abstract concepts that a researcher plans to study

reliability
: a measure of a study's consistency that considers how likely results are to be replicated if a study is reproduced

scientific method
: an established scholarly research method that involves asking a question, researching existing sources, forming a hypothesis, designing and conducting a study, and drawing conclusions

validity
: the degree to which a sociological measure accurately reflects the topic of study

Research Methods

- Differentiate between four kinds of research methods: surveys, field research, experiments, and secondary data analysis
- Understand why different topics are better suited to different research approaches

Sociologists examine the world, see a problem or interesting pattern, and set out to study it. They use research methods to design a study—perhaps a detailed, systematic, scientific method for conducting research and obtaining data, or perhaps an ethnographic study utilizing an interpretive framework. Planning the research design is a key step in any sociological study.

When entering a particular social environment, a researcher must be careful. There are times to remain anonymous and times to be overt. There are times to conduct interviews and times to simply observe. Some participants need to be thoroughly informed; others should not know they are being observed. A researcher wouldn't stroll into a crime-ridden neighborhood at midnight, calling out, "Any gang members around?" And if a researcher walked into a coffee shop and told the employees they would be observed as part of a study on work efficiency, the self-conscious, intimidated baristas might not behave naturally. This is called the **Hawthorne effect**—where people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study. The Hawthorne effect is unavoidable in some research. In many cases, sociologists have to make the purpose of the study known. Subjects must be aware that they are being observed, and a certain amount of artificiality may result (Sonnenfeld 1985).

Making sociologists' presence invisible is not always realistic for other reasons. That option is not available to a researcher studying prison behaviors, early education, or the Ku Klux Klan. Researchers can't just stroll into prisons, kindergarten classrooms, or Klan meetings and unobtrusively observe behaviors. In situations like these, other methods are needed. All studies shape the research design, while research design simultaneously shapes the study. Researchers choose methods that best suit their study topics and that fit with their overall approaches to research.

In planning studies' designs, sociologists generally choose from four widely used methods of social investigation: survey, field research, experiment, and **secondary data analysis**, or use of existing sources. Every research method comes with plusses and minuses, and the topic of study strongly influences which method or methods are put to use.

Surveys

As a research method, a **survey** collects data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire. The survey is one of the most widely used scientific research methods. The standard survey format allows individuals a level of anonymity in which they can express personal ideas.

Questionnaires are a common research method; the U.S. Census is a well-known example. (Photo courtesy of Kathryn Decker/flickr)

At some point, most people in the United States respond to some type of survey. The U.S. Census is an excellent example of a large-scale survey intended to gather sociological data. Not all surveys are considered sociological research, however, and many surveys people commonly encounter focus on identifying marketing needs and strategies rather than testing a hypothesis or contributing to social science knowledge. Questions such as, "How many hot dogs do you eat in a month?" or "Were the staff helpful?" are not usually designed as scientific research. Often, polls on television do not reflect a general population, but are merely answers from a specific show's audience. Polls conducted by programs such as *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* represent the opinions of fans but are not particularly scientific. A good contrast to these are the Nielsen Ratings, which determine the popularity of television programming through scientific market research.

American Idol uses a real-time survey system—with numbers—that allows members in the audience to vote on contestants. (Photo courtesy of Sam Howzit/flickr)

Sociologists conduct surveys under controlled conditions for specific purposes. Surveys gather different types of information from people. While surveys are not great at capturing the ways people really behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel and think—or at least how they say they feel and think. Surveys can track preferences for presidential candidates or reported individual behaviors (such as sleeping, driving, or texting habits) or factual information such as employment status, income, and education levels.

A survey targets a specific **population**, people who are the focus of a study, such as college athletes, international students, or teenagers living with type 1 (juvenile-onset) diabetes. Most researchers choose to survey a small sector of the population, or a **sample**: that is, a manageable number of subjects who *represent* a larger population. The success of a study depends on how well a population is represented by the sample. In a **random sample**, every person in a population has the same chance of being chosen for the study. According to the laws of probability, random samples represent the population as a whole. For instance, a Gallup Poll, if conducted as a nationwide random sampling, should be able to provide an accurate estimate of public opinion whether it contacts 2,000 or 10,000 people.

After selecting subjects, the researcher develops a specific plan to ask questions and record responses. It is important to inform subjects of the nature and purpose of the study up front. If they agree to participate, researchers thank subjects and offer them a chance to see the results of the study if they are interested. The researcher presents the

subjects with an instrument, which is a means of gathering the information. A common instrument is a questionnaire, in which subjects answer a series of questions. For some topics, the researcher might ask yes-or-no or multiple-choice questions, allowing subjects to choose possible responses to each question. This kind of **quantitative data**—research collected in numerical form that can be counted—are easy to tabulate. Just count up the number of "yes" and "no" responses or correct answers, and chart them into percentages.

Questionnaires can also ask more complex questions with more complex answers—beyond "yes," "no," or the option next to a checkbox. In those cases, the answers are subjective and vary from person to person. *How do plan to use your college education? Why do you follow Jimmy Buffett around the country and attend every concert?* Those types of questions require short essay responses, and participants willing to take the time to write those answers will convey personal information about religious beliefs, political views, and morals. Some topics that reflect internal thought are impossible to observe directly and are difficult to discuss honestly in a public forum. People are more likely to share honest answers if they can respond to questions anonymously. This type of information is **qualitative data**—results that are subjective and often based on what is seen in a natural setting. Qualitative information is harder to organize and tabulate. The researcher will end up with a wide range of responses, some of which may be surprising. The benefit of written opinions, though, is the wealth of material that they provide.

An **interview** is a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject, and it is a way of conducting surveys on a topic. Interviews are similar to the short-answer questions on surveys in that the researcher asks subjects a series of questions. However, participants are free to respond as they wish, without being limited by predetermined choices. In the back-and-forth conversation of an interview, a researcher can ask for clarification, spend more time on a subtopic, or ask additional questions. In an interview, a subject will ideally feel free to open up and answer questions that are often complex. There are no right or wrong answers. The subject might not even know how to answer the questions honestly.

Questions such as, "How did society's view of alcohol consumption influence your decision whether or not to take your first sip of alcohol?" or "Did you feel that the divorce of your parents would put a social stigma on your family?" involve so many factors that the answers are difficult to categorize. A researcher needs to avoid steering or prompting the subject to respond in a specific way; otherwise, the results will prove to be unreliable. And, obviously, a sociological interview is not an interrogation. The researcher will benefit from gaining a subject's trust, from empathizing or commiserating with a subject, and from listening without judgment.

Field Research

The work of sociology rarely happens in limited, confined spaces. Sociologists seldom study subjects in their own offices or laboratories. Rather, sociologists go out into the world. They meet subjects where they live, work, and play. **Field research** refers to gathering **primary data** from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey. It is a research method suited to an interpretive framework rather than to the scientific method. To conduct field research, the sociologist must be willing to step into new environments and observe, participate, or experience those worlds. In field work, the sociologists, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element.

The researcher interacts with or observes a person or people and gathers data along the way. The key point in field research is that it takes place in the subject's natural environment, whether it's a coffee shop or tribal village, a homeless shelter or the DMV, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort.

Sociological researchers travel across countries and cultures to interact with and observe subjects in their natural environments. (Photo courtesy of IMLS Digital Collections and

Content/flickr and
Olympic National Park)

While field research often begins in a specific *setting*, the study's purpose is to observe specific *behaviors* in that setting. Field work is optimal for observing *how* people behave. It is less useful, however, for understanding *why* they behave that way. You can't really narrow down cause and effect when there are so many variables floating around in a natural environment.

Much of the data gathered in field research are based not on cause and effect but on **correlation**. And while field research looks for correlation, its small sample size does not allow for establishing a causal relationship between two variables.

Note:
Parrotheads as Sociological Subjects

Business suits for the day job are replaced by leis and T-shirts for a Jimmy Buffett concert. (Photo courtesy of Sam Howzitt/flickr)

Some sociologists study small groups of people who share an identity in one aspect of their lives. Almost everyone belongs to a group of like-minded people who share an interest or hobby. Scientologists, folk dancers, or members of Mensa (an organization for people with exceptionally high IQs) express a specific part of their identity through their affiliation with a group. Those groups are often of great interest to sociologists. Jimmy Buffett, an American musician who built a career from his single top-10 song "Margaritaville," has a following of devoted groupies called Parrotheads. Some of

them have taken fandom to the extreme, making Parrothead culture a lifestyle. In 2005, Parrotheads and their subculture caught the attention of researchers John Mihelich and John Papineau. The two saw the way Jimmy Buffett fans collectively created an artificial reality. They wanted to know how fan groups shape culture.

What Mihelich and Papineau found was that Parrotheads, for the most part, do not seek to challenge or even change society, as many sub-groups do. In fact, most Parrotheads live successfully within society, holding upper-level jobs in the corporate world. What they seek is escape from the stress of daily life.

At Jimmy Buffett concerts, Parrotheads engage in a form of role play. They paint their faces and dress for the tropics in grass skirts, Hawaiian leis, and Parrot hats. These fans don't generally play the part of Parrotheads outside of these concerts; you are not likely to see a lone Parrothead in a bank or library. In that sense, Parrothead culture is less about individualism and more about conformity. Being a Parrothead means sharing a specific identity. Parrotheads feel connected to each other: it's a group identity, not an individual one.

In their study, Mihelich and Papineau quote from a recent book by sociologist Richard Butsch, who writes, "un-self-conscious acts, if done by many people together, can produce change, even though the change may be unintended" (2000). Many Parrothead fan groups have performed good works in the name of Jimmy Buffett culture, donating to charities and volunteering their services.

However, the authors suggest that what really drives Parrothead culture is commercialism. Jimmy Buffett's popularity was dying out in the 1980s until being reinvigorated after he signed a sponsorship deal with a beer company. These days, his concert tours alone generate nearly $30 million a year. Buffett made a lucrative career for himself by partnering with product companies and marketing Margaritaville in the form of T-shirts, restaurants, casinos, and an expansive line of products. Some fans accuse Buffett of selling out, while others admire his financial success. Buffett makes no secret of his commercial exploitations; from the stage, he's been known to tell his fans, "Just remember, I am spending your money foolishly."

Mihelich and Papineau gathered much of their information online. Referring to their study as a "Web ethnography," they collected extensive narrative material from fans who joined Parrothead clubs and posted their experiences on websites. "We do not claim to have conducted a complete ethnography of Parrothead fans, or even of the Parrothead Web activity," state the authors, "but we focused on particular aspects of Parrothead practice as revealed through Web research" (2005). Fan narratives gave them insight into how individuals identify with Buffett's world and how fans used popular music to cultivate personal and collective meaning.

In conducting studies about pockets of culture, most sociologists seek to discover a universal appeal. Mihelich and Papineau stated, "Although Parrotheads are a relative minority of the contemporary US population, an in-depth look at their practice and conditions illuminate [sic] cultural practices and conditions many of us experience and participate in" (2005).

Here, we will look at three types of field research: participant observation, ethnography, and the case study.

Participant Observation

In 2000, a comic writer named Rodney Rothman wanted an insider's view of white-collar work. He slipped into the sterile, high-rise offices of a New York "dot com" agency. Every day for two weeks, he pretended to work there. His main purpose was simply to see whether anyone would notice him or challenge his presence. No one did. The receptionist greeted him. The employees smiled and said good morning. Rothman was accepted as part of the team. He even went so far as to claim a desk, inform the receptionist of his whereabouts, and attend a meeting. He published an article about his experience in *The New Yorker* called "My Fake Job" (2000). Later, he was discredited for allegedly fabricating some details of the story and *The New Yorker* issued an apology. However, Rothman's entertaining article still offered fascinating descriptions of the inside workings of a "dot com" company and exemplified the lengths to which a sociologist will go to uncover material.

Rothman had conducted a form of study called **participant observation**, in which researchers join people and participate in a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context. This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. Researchers temporarily put themselves into roles and record their observations. A researcher might work as a waitress in a diner, live as a homeless person for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, and they may not disclose their true identity or purpose if they feel it would compromise the results of their research.

Is she a working waitress or a sociologist conducting a study using participant observation? (Photo courtesy of zoetnet/flickr)

At the beginning of a field study, researchers might have a question: “What really goes on in the kitchen of the most popular diner on campus?” or “What is it like to be homeless?” Participant observation is a useful method if the researcher wants to explore a certain environment from the inside.

Field researchers simply want to observe and learn. In such a setting, the researcher will be alert and open minded to whatever happens, recording all observations accurately. Soon, as patterns emerge, questions will become more specific, observations will lead to hypotheses, and hypotheses will guide the researcher in shaping data into results.

In a study of small towns in the United States conducted by sociological researchers John S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, the team altered their purpose as they gathered data. They initially planned to focus their study on the role of religion in U.S. towns. As they gathered observations, they realized that the effect of industrialization and urbanization was the more relevant topic of this social group. The Lynds did not change their methods, but they revised their purpose. This shaped the structure of *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, their published results (Lynd and Lynd 1959).

The Lynds were upfront about their mission. The townspeople of Muncie, Indiana, knew why the researchers were in their midst. But some sociologists prefer not to alert people to their presence. The main advantage of covert participant observation is that it allows the researcher access to authentic, natural behaviors of a group’s members. The challenge, however, is gaining access to a setting without disrupting the pattern of

others' behavior. Becoming an inside member of a group, organization, or subculture takes time and effort. Researchers must pretend to be something they are not. The process could involve role playing, making contacts, networking, or applying for a job.

Once inside a group, some researchers spend months or even years pretending to be one of the people they are observing. However, as observers, they cannot get too involved. They must keep their purpose in mind and apply the sociological perspective. That way, they illuminate social patterns that are often unrecognized. Because information gathered during participant observation is mostly qualitative, rather than quantitative, the end results are often descriptive or interpretive. The researcher might present findings in an article or book and describe what he or she witnessed and experienced.

This type of research is what journalist Barbara Ehrenreich conducted for her book *Nickel and Dimed*. One day over lunch with her editor, as the story goes, Ehrenreich mentioned an idea. *How can people exist on minimum-wage work? How do low-income workers get by?* she wondered. *Someone should do a study.* To her surprise, her editor responded, *Why don't you do it?*

That's how Ehrenreich found herself joining the ranks of the working class. For several months, she left her comfortable home and lived and worked among people who lacked, for the most part, higher education and marketable job skills. Undercover, she applied for and worked minimum wage jobs as a waitress, a cleaning woman, a nursing home aide, and a retail chain employee. During her participant observation, she used only her income from those jobs to pay for food, clothing, transportation, and shelter.

She discovered the obvious, that it's almost impossible to get by on minimum wage work. She also experienced and observed attitudes many middle and upper-class people never think about. She witnessed firsthand the treatment of working class employees. She saw the extreme measures people take to make ends meet and to survive. She described fellow employees who held two or three jobs, worked seven days a week, lived in cars, could not pay to treat chronic health conditions, got randomly fired, submitted to drug tests, and moved in and out of homeless shelters. She brought aspects of that life to light, describing difficult working conditions and the poor treatment that low-wage workers suffer.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, the book she wrote upon her return to her real life as a well-paid writer, has been widely read and used in many college classrooms.

Field research happens in real locations. What type of environment do work spaces foster? What would a sociologist discover after blending in? (Photo courtesy of drewzhrodague/flickr)

Ethnography

Ethnography is the extended observation of the social perspective and cultural values of an entire social setting. Ethnographies involve objective observation of an entire community.

The heart of an ethnographic study focuses on how subjects view their own social standing and how they understand themselves in relation to a community. An ethnographic study might observe, for example, a small U.S. fishing town, an Inuit community, a village in Thailand, a Buddhist monastery, a private boarding school, or an amusement park. These places all have borders. People live, work, study, or vacation within those borders. People are there for a certain reason and therefore behave in certain ways and respect certain cultural norms. An ethnographer would commit to spending a determined amount of time studying every aspect of the chosen place, taking in as much as possible.

A sociologist studying a tribe in the Amazon might watch the way villagers go about their daily lives and then write a paper about it. To observe a spiritual retreat center, an ethnographer might sign up for a retreat and attend as a guest for an extended stay, observe and record data, and collate the material into results.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is an extension of basic ethnographic research principles that focuses intentionally on everyday concrete social relationships. Developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, institutional ethnography is often considered a feminist-inspired approach to social analysis and primarily considers women's experiences within male-dominated societies and power structures. Smith's work is seen to challenge sociology's exclusion of women, both academically and in the study of women's lives (Fenstermaker, n.d.).

Historically, social science research tended to objectify women and ignore their experiences except as viewed from the male perspective. Modern feminists note that describing women, and other marginalized groups, as subordinates helps those in authority maintain their own dominant positions (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, n.d.). Smith's three major works explored what she called "the conceptual practices of power" (1990; cited in Fensternmaker, n.d.) and are still considered seminal works in feminist theory and ethnography.

Note:

The Making of *Middletown: A Study in Modern U.S. Culture*

In 1924, a young married couple named Robert and Helen Lynd undertook an unprecedented ethnography: to apply sociological methods to the study of one U.S. city in order to discover what "ordinary" people in the United States did and believed. Choosing Muncie, Indiana (population about 30,000), as their subject, they moved to the small town and lived there for eighteen months.

Ethnographers had been examining other cultures for decades—groups considered minority or outsider—like gangs, immigrants, and the poor. But no one had studied the so-called average American.

Recording interviews and using surveys to gather data, the Lynds did not sugarcoat or idealize U.S. life (PBS). They objectively stated what they observed. Researching existing sources, they compared Muncie in 1890 to the Muncie they observed in 1924. Most Muncie adults, they found, had grown up on farms but now lived in homes inside the city. From that discovery, the Lynds focused their study on the impact of industrialization and urbanization.

They observed that Muncie was divided into business class and working class groups. They defined *business class* as dealing with abstract concepts and symbols, while *working class* people used tools to create concrete objects. The two classes led different lives with different goals and hopes. However, the Lynds observed, mass production offered both classes the same amenities. Like wealthy families, the working class was now able to own radios, cars, washing machines, telephones,

vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators. This was an emerging material new reality of the 1920s.

As the Lynds worked, they divided their manuscript into six sections: Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Using Leisure, Engaging in Religious Practices, and Engaging in Community Activities. Each chapter included subsections such as “The Long Arm of the Job” and “Why Do They Work So Hard?” in the “Getting a Living” chapter.

When the study was completed, the Lynds encountered a big problem. The Rockefeller Foundation, which had commissioned the book, claimed it was useless and refused to publish it. The Lynds asked if they could seek a publisher themselves.

Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture was not only published in 1929 but also became an instant bestseller, a status unheard of for a sociological study. The book sold out six printings in its first year of publication, and has never gone out of print (PBS).

Nothing like it had ever been done before. *Middletown* was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times*. Readers in the 1920s and 1930s identified with the citizens of Muncie, Indiana, but they were equally fascinated by the sociological methods and the use of scientific data to define ordinary people in the United States. The book was proof that social data was important—and interesting—to the U.S. public.

A classroom in Muncie, Indiana, in 1917, five years before John and Helen Lynd began researching this “typical” U.S. community. (Photo courtesy of Don O’Brien/flickr)

Case Study

Sometimes a researcher wants to study one specific person or event. A **case study** is an in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual. To conduct a case study, a

researcher examines existing sources like documents and archival records, conducts interviews, engages in direct observation and even participant observation, if possible.

Researchers might use this method to study a single case of, for example, a foster child, drug lord, cancer patient, criminal, or rape victim. However, a major criticism of the case study as a method is that a developed study of a single case, while offering depth on a topic, does not provide enough evidence to form a generalized conclusion. In other words, it is difficult to make universal claims based on just one person, since one person does not verify a pattern. This is why most sociologists do not use case studies as a primary research method.

However, case studies are useful when the single case is unique. In these instances, a single case study can add tremendous knowledge to a certain discipline. For example, a feral child, also called "wild child," is one who grows up isolated from human beings. Feral children grow up without social contact and language, which are elements crucial to a "civilized" child's development. These children mimic the behaviors and movements of animals, and often invent their own language. There are only about one hundred cases of "feral children" in the world.

As you may imagine, a feral child is a subject of great interest to researchers. Feral children provide unique information about child development because they have grown up outside of the parameters of "normal" child development. And since there are very few feral children, the case study is the most appropriate method for researchers to use in studying the subject.

At age three, a Ukranian girl named Oxana Malaya suffered severe parental neglect. She lived in a shed with dogs, and she ate raw meat and scraps. Five years later, a neighbor called authorities and reported seeing a girl who ran on all fours, barking. Officials brought Oxana into society, where she was cared for and taught some human behaviors, but she never became fully socialized. She has been designated as unable to support herself and now lives in a mental institution (Grice 2011). Case studies like this offer a way for sociologists to collect data that may not be collectable by any other method.

Experiments

You've probably tested personal social theories. "If I study at night and review in the morning, I'll improve my retention skills." Or, "If I stop drinking soda, I'll feel better." Cause and effect. If this, then that. When you test the theory, your results either prove or disprove your hypothesis.

One way researchers test social theories is by conducting an **experiment**, meaning they investigate relationships to test a hypothesis—a scientific approach.

There are two main types of experiments: lab-based experiments and natural or field experiments. In a lab setting, the research can be controlled so that perhaps more data can be recorded in a certain amount of time. In a natural or field-based experiment, the generation of data cannot be controlled but the information might be considered more accurate since it was collected without interference or intervention by the researcher.

As a research method, either type of sociological experiment is useful for testing *if-then* statements: *if* a particular thing happens, *then* another particular thing will result. To set up a lab-based experiment, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables.

Classically, the sociologist selects a set of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education. Those people are divided into two groups. One is the experimental group and the other is the control group. The experimental group is exposed to the independent variable(s) and the control group is not. To test the benefits of tutoring, for example, the sociologist might expose the experimental group of students to tutoring but not the control group. Then both groups would be tested for differences in performance to see if tutoring had an effect on the experimental group of students. As you can imagine, in a case like this, the researcher would not want to jeopardize the accomplishments of either group of students, so the setting would be somewhat artificial. The test would not be for a grade reflected on their permanent record, for example.

Note:
An Experiment in Action

Sociologist Frances Heussenstamm conducted an experiment to explore the correlation between traffic stops and race-based bumper stickers. This issue of racial profiling remains a hot-

button topic today. (Photo courtesy of dwightsghost/flickr)

A real-life example will help illustrate the experiment process. In 1971, Frances Heussenstamm, a sociology professor at California State University at Los Angeles, had a theory about police prejudice. To test her theory she conducted an experiment. She chose fifteen students from three ethnic backgrounds: black, white, and Hispanic. She chose students who routinely drove to and from campus along Los Angeles freeway routes, and who'd had perfect driving records for longer than a year. Those were her independent variables—students, good driving records, same commute route. Next, she placed a Black Panther bumper sticker on each car. That sticker, a representation of a social value, was the independent variable. In the 1970s, the Black Panthers were a revolutionary group actively fighting racism. Heussenstamm asked the students to follow their normal driving patterns. She wanted to see whether seeming support of the Black Panthers would change how these good drivers were treated by the police patrolling the highways. The dependent variable would be the number of traffic stops/citations.

The first arrest, for an incorrect lane change, was made two hours after the experiment began. One participant was pulled over three times in three days. He quit the study. After seventeen days, the fifteen drivers had collected a total of thirty-three traffic citations. The experiment was halted. The funding to pay traffic fines had run out, and so had the enthusiasm of the participants (Heussenstamm 1971).

Secondary Data Analysis

While sociologists often engage in original research studies, they also contribute knowledge to the discipline through **secondary data analysis**. Secondary data doesn't result from firsthand research collected from primary sources, but are the already completed work of other researchers. Sociologists might study works written by historians, economists, teachers, or early sociologists. They might search through periodicals, newspapers, or magazines from any period in history.

Using available information not only saves time and money but can also add depth to a study. Sociologists often interpret findings in a new way, a way that was not part of an author's original purpose or intention. To study how women were encouraged to act and behave in the 1960s, for example, a researcher might watch movies, televisions shows, and situation comedies from that period. Or to research changes in behavior and attitudes due to the emergence of television in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a sociologist would rely on new interpretations of secondary data. Decades from now,

researchers will most likely conduct similar studies on the advent of mobile phones, the Internet, or Facebook.

Social scientists also learn by analyzing the research of a variety of agencies. Governmental departments and global groups, like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics or the World Health Organization, publish studies with findings that are useful to sociologists. A public statistic like the foreclosure rate might be useful for studying the effects of the 2008 recession; a racial demographic profile might be compared with data on education funding to examine the resources accessible by different groups.

One of the advantages of secondary data is that it is **nonreactive research** (or unobtrusive research), meaning that it does not include direct contact with subjects and will not alter or influence people's behaviors. Unlike studies requiring direct contact with people, using previously published data doesn't require entering a population and the investment and risks inherent in that research process.

Using available data does have its challenges. Public records are not always easy to access. A researcher will need to do some legwork to track them down and gain access to records. To guide the search through a vast library of materials and avoid wasting time reading unrelated sources, sociologists employ **content analysis**, applying a systematic approach to record and value information gleaned from secondary data as they relate to the study at hand.

But, in some cases, there is no way to verify the accuracy of existing data. It is easy to count how many drunk drivers, for example, are pulled over by the police. But how many are not? While it's possible to discover the percentage of teenage students who drop out of high school, it might be more challenging to determine the number who return to school or get their GED later.

Another problem arises when data are unavailable in the exact form needed or do not include the precise angle the researcher seeks. For example, the average salaries paid to professors at a public school is public record. But the separate figures don't necessarily reveal how long it took each professor to reach the salary range, what their educational backgrounds are, or how long they've been teaching.

When conducting content analysis, it is important to consider the date of publication of an existing source and to take into account attitudes and common cultural ideals that may have influenced the research. For example, Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd gathered research for their book *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* in the 1920s. Attitudes and cultural norms were vastly different then than they are now. Beliefs about gender roles, race, education, and work have changed significantly since then. At the time, the study's purpose was to reveal the truth about small U.S. communities. Today, it is an illustration of 1920s' attitudes and values.

Summary

Sociological research is a fairly complex process. As you can see, a lot goes into even a simple research design. There are many steps and much to consider when collecting data on human behavior, as well as in interpreting and analyzing data in order to form conclusive results. Sociologists use scientific methods for good reason. The scientific method provides a system of organization that helps researchers plan and conduct the study while ensuring that data and results are reliable, valid, and objective.

The many methods available to researchers—including experiments, surveys, field studies, and secondary data analysis—all come with advantages and disadvantages. The strength of a study can depend on the choice and implementation of the appropriate method of gathering research. Depending on the topic, a study might use a single method or a combination of methods. It is important to plan a research design before undertaking a study. The information gathered may in itself be surprising, and the study design should provide a solid framework in which to analyze predicted and unpredicted data.

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges
Survey	• Questionnaires • Interviews	• Yields many responses • Can survey a large sample • Quantitative data are easy to chart	• Can be time consuming • Can be difficult to encourage participant response • Captures what people think and believe but not necessarily how they behave in real life
Field Work	• Observation • Participant observation • Ethnography • Case study	• Yields detailed, accurate real-life information	• Time consuming • Data captures how people behave but not what they think and believe • Qualitative data is difficult to organize

Method	Implementation	Advantages	Challenges
Experiment	• Deliberate manipulation of social customs and mores	• Tests cause and effect relationships	• Hawthorne Effect • Ethical concerns about people's wellbeing
Secondary Data Analysis	• Analysis of government data (census, health, crime statistics) • Research of historic documents	• Makes good use of previous sociological information	• Data could be focused on a purpose other than yours • Data can be hard to find

Main Sociological Research MethodsSociological research methods have advantages and disadvantages.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem: Which materials are considered secondary data?

a. Photos and letters given to you by another person
b. Books and articles written by other authors about their studies
c. Information that you have gathered and now have included in your results
d. Responses from participants whom you both surveyed and interviewed

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Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem:

What method did researchers John Mihelich and John Papineau use to study Parrotheads?

a. Survey
b. Experiment
c. Web Ethnography
d. Case study

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

Why is choosing a random sample an effective way to select participants?

a. Participants do not know they are part of a study
b. The researcher has no control over who is in the study
c. It is larger than an ordinary sample
d. Everyone has the same chance of being part of the study

Solution:
Answer

D

Exercise:

Problem:

What research method did John S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd mainly use in their *Middletown* study?

a. Secondary data
b. Survey
c. Participant observation

d. Experiment

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem: Which research approach is best suited to the scientific method?

a. Questionnaire
b. Case study
c. Ethnography
d. Secondary data analysis

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

The main difference between ethnography and other types of participant observation is:

a. ethnography isn’t based on hypothesis testing
b. ethnography subjects are unaware they’re being studied
c. ethnographic studies always involve minority ethnic groups
d. ethnography focuses on how subjects view themselves in relationship to the community

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Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem: Which best describes the results of a case study?

a. It produces more reliable results than other methods because of its depth
b. Its results are not generally applicable
c. It relies solely on secondary data analysis
d. All of the above

Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem:

Using secondary data is considered an unobtrusive or _____ research method.

a. nonreactive
b. nonparticipatory
c. nonrestrictive
d. nonconfrontive

Solution:
Answer

A

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

What type of data do surveys gather? For what topics would surveys be the best research method? What drawbacks might you expect to encounter when using a survey? To explore further, ask a research question and write a hypothesis. Then create a survey of about six questions relevant to the topic. Provide a rationale for each question. Now define your population and create a plan for recruiting a random sample and administering the survey.

Exercise:

Problem:

Imagine you are about to do field research in a specific place for a set time. Instead of thinking about the topic of study itself, consider how you, as the researcher, will have to prepare for the study. What personal, social, and physical sacrifices will you have to make? How will you manage your personal effects? What organizational equipment and systems will you need to collect the data?

Exercise:

Problem:

Create a brief research design about a topic in which you are passionately interested. Now write a letter to a philanthropic or grant organization requesting funding for your study. How can you describe the project in a convincing yet realistic and objective way? Explain how the results of your study will be a relevant contribution to the body of sociological work already in existence.

Further Research

For information on current real-world sociology experiments, visit: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Sociology-Experiments

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Glossary

case study
: in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual

content analysis
: applying a systematic approach to record and value information gleaned from secondary data as it relates to the study at hand

correlation

when a change in one variable coincides with a change in another variable, but does not necessarily indicate causation

ethnography
: observing a complete social setting and all that it entails

experiment
: the testing of a hypothesis under controlled conditions

field research
: gathering data from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey

Hawthorne effect
: when study subjects behave in a certain manner due to their awareness of being observed by a researcher

interview
: a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject

nonreactive research
: using secondary data, does not include direct contact with subjects and will not alter or influence people's behaviors

participant observation
: when a researcher immerses herself in a group or social setting in order to make observations from an "insider" perspective

population
: a defined group serving as the subject of a study

primary data
: data that are collected directly from firsthand experience

quantitative data
: represent research collected in numerical form that can be counted

qualitative data
: comprise information that is subjective and often based on what is seen in a natural setting

random sample
: a study's participants being randomly selected to serve as a representation of a larger population

samples
: small, manageable number of subjects that represent the population

secondary data analysis
: using data collected by others but applying new interpretations

surveys
: collect data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire

Ethical Concerns

- Understand why ethical standards exist
- Demonstrate awareness of the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics
- Define value neutrality

Sociologists conduct studies to shed light on human behaviors. Knowledge is a powerful tool that can be used toward positive change. And while a sociologist's goal is often simply to uncover knowledge rather than to spur action, many people use sociological studies to help improve people's lives. In that sense, conducting a sociological study comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. Like any researchers, sociologists must consider their ethical obligation to avoid harming subjects or groups while conducting their research.

The American Sociological Association, or ASA, is the major professional organization of sociologists in North America. The ASA is a great resource for students of sociology as well. The ASA maintains a **code of ethics**—formal guidelines for conducting sociological research—consisting of principles and ethical standards to be used in the discipline. It also describes procedures for filing, investigating, and resolving complaints of unethical conduct.

Practicing sociologists and sociology students have a lot to consider. Some of the guidelines state that researchers must try to be skillful and fair-minded in their work, especially as it relates to their human subjects. Researchers must obtain participants' informed consent and inform subjects of the responsibilities and risks of research before they agree to partake. During a study, sociologists must ensure the safety of participants and immediately stop work if a subject becomes potentially endangered on any level.

Researchers are required to protect the privacy of research participants whenever possible. Even if pressured by authorities, such as police or courts, researchers are not ethically allowed to release confidential information. Researchers must make results available to other sociologists, must make public all sources of financial support, and must not accept

funding from any organization that might cause a conflict of interest or seek to influence the research results for its own purposes. The ASA's ethical considerations shape not only the study but also the publication of results.

Pioneer German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) identified another crucial ethical concern. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study results. While he accepted that some aspects of research design might be influenced by personal values, he declared it was entirely inappropriate to allow personal values to shape the interpretation of the responses. Sociologists, he stated, must establish **value neutrality**, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results (1949). Sociologists are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it is impossible to set aside personal values and retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias. It does not discredit the results but allows readers to view them as one form of truth rather than a singular fact. Some sociologists attempt to remain uncritical and as objective as possible when studying cultural institutions. Value neutrality does not mean having no opinions. It means striving to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when analyzing data. It means avoiding skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Investigators are ethically obligated to report results, even when they contradict personal views, predicted outcomes, or widely accepted beliefs.

Summary

Sociologists and sociology students must take ethical responsibility for any study they conduct. They must first and foremost guarantee the safety of their participants. Whenever possible, they must ensure that participants have been fully informed before consenting to be part of a study.

The ASA maintains ethical guidelines that sociologists must take into account as they conduct research. The guidelines address conducting studies, properly using existing sources, accepting funding, and publishing results.

Sociologists must try to maintain value neutrality. They must gather and analyze data objectively and set aside their personal preferences, beliefs, and opinions. They must report findings accurately, even if they contradict personal convictions.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem: Which statement illustrates value neutrality?

a. Obesity in children is obviously a result of parental neglect and, therefore, schools should take a greater role to prevent it
b. In 2003, states like Arkansas adopted laws requiring elementary schools to remove soft drink vending machines from schools
c. Merely restricting children's access to junk food at school is not enough to prevent obesity
d. Physical activity and healthy eating are a fundamental part of a child's education

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Solution:
Answers

B

Exercise:

Problem:

Which person or organization defined the concept of value neutrality?

a. Institutional Review Board (IRB)

b. Peter Rossi
c. American Sociological Association (ASA)
d. Max Weber

Solution:
Answers

D

Exercise:

Problem:

To study the effects of fast food on lifestyle, health, and culture, from which group would a researcher ethically be unable to accept funding?

a. A fast-food restaurant
b. A nonprofit health organization
c. A private hospital
d. A governmental agency like Health and Social Services

Solution:
Answers

A

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Why do you think the ASA crafted such a detailed set of ethical principles? What type of study could put human participants at risk? Think of some examples of studies that might be harmful. Do you think that, in the name of sociology, some researchers might be tempted to cross boundaries that threaten human rights? Why?

Exercise:

Problem:

Would you willingly participate in a sociological study that could potentially put your health and safety at risk, but had the potential to help thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people? For example, would you participate in a study of a new drug that could cure diabetes or cancer, even if it meant great inconvenience and physical discomfort for you or possible permanent damage?

Further Research

Founded in 1905, the ASA is a nonprofit organization located in Washington, DC, with a membership of 14,000 researchers, faculty members, students, and practitioners of sociology. Its mission is "to articulate policy and implement programs likely to have the broadest possible impact for sociology now and in the future." Learn more about this organization at http://openstaxcollege.org/l/ASA.

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Glossary

code of ethics
: a set of guidelines that the American Sociological Association has established to foster ethical research and professionally responsible scholarship in sociology

value neutrality
: a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment during the course of a study and in publishing results

Introduction to Culture
class="introduction"

People adhere to various rules and standards that are created and maintained in culture, such as giving a high five to someone. (Photo courtesy of Chris Barnes/flickr)

What are the rules when you pass an acquaintance at school, work, in the grocery store, or in the mall? Generally, we do not consider all of the intricacies of the rules of behavior. We may simply say, "Hello!" and ask, "How was your weekend?" or some other trivial question meant to be a friendly greeting. Rarely do we physically embrace or even touch the individual. In fact, doing so may be viewed with scorn or distaste, since as people in the United States we have fairly rigid rules about personal space. However, we all adhere to various rules and standards that are created and maintained in culture. These rules and expectations have meaning, and there are ways in which you may violate this negotiation. Consider what would happen if you stopped and informed everyone who said, "Hi, how are you?" exactly how you were doing that day, and in detail. You would more than likely violate rules of culture and specifically greeting. Perhaps in a different culture the question would be more literal, and it may require a response. Or if you are having coffee with a good friend, perhaps that question warrants a more detailed response. These examples are all aspects of **culture**, which is shared beliefs, values, and practices, that participants must learn. Sociologically, we examine in what situation and context certain behavior is expected, and in which situations perhaps it is not. These rules are created and enforced by people who interact and share culture.

In everyday conversation, people rarely distinguish between the terms *culture* and *society*, but the terms have slightly different meanings, and the distinction is important to a sociologist. A **society** describes a group of people who share a community and a culture. By "community," sociologists refer to a definable region—as small as a neighborhood (Brooklyn, or "the east side of town"), as large as a country (Ethiopia, the United States, or Nepal), or somewhere in between (in the United States, this might include someone who identifies with Southern or Midwestern society). To clarify, a culture represents the *beliefs and practices* of a group, while society represents the *people* who share those beliefs and practices. Neither society nor culture could exist without the other. In this chapter, we examine the relationship between culture and society in greater detail and pay special attention to the elements and forces that shape culture, including diversity and cultural changes. A final discussion touches on the different theoretical perspectives from which sociologists research culture.

Glossary

culture
: shared beliefs, values, and practices

society
: people who live in a definable community and who share a culture

What Is Culture?

- Differentiate between culture and society
- Explain material versus nonmaterial culture
- Discuss the concept of cultural universalism as it relates to society
- Compare and contrast ethnocentrism and xenocentrism

Humans are social creatures. Since the dawn of *Homo sapiens* nearly 250,000 years ago, people have grouped together into communities in order to survive. Living together, people form common habits and behaviors—from specific methods of childrearing to preferred techniques for obtaining food. In modern-day Paris, many people shop daily at outdoor markets to pick up what they need for their evening meal, buying cheese, meat, and vegetables from different specialty stalls. In the United States, the majority of people shop once a week at supermarkets, filling large carts to the brim. How would a Parisian perceive U.S. shopping behaviors that Americans take for granted?

Almost every human behavior, from shopping to marriage to expressions of feelings, is learned. In the United States, people tend to view marriage as a choice between two people, based on mutual feelings of love. In other nations and in other times, marriages have been arranged through an intricate process of interviews and negotiations between entire families, or in other cases, through a direct system, such as a “mail order bride.” To someone raised in New York City, the marriage customs of a family from Nigeria may seem strange or even wrong. Conversely, someone from a traditional Kolkata family might be perplexed with the idea of romantic love as the foundation for marriage and lifelong commitment. In other words, the way in which people view marriage depends largely on what they have been taught.

Behavior based on learned customs is not a bad thing. Being familiar with unwritten rules helps people feel secure and “normal.” Most people want to live their daily lives confident that their behaviors will not be challenged or disrupted. But even an action as seemingly simple as commuting to work evidences a great deal of cultural propriety.

How would a visitor from the suburban United States act and feel on this crowded Tokyo train? (Photo courtesy of simonglucas/flickr)

Take the case of going to work on public transportation. Whether people are commuting in Dublin, Cairo, Mumbai, or San Francisco, many behaviors will be the same, but significant differences also arise between cultures. Typically, a passenger will find a marked bus stop or station, wait for his bus or train, pay an agent before or after boarding, and quietly take a seat if one is available. But when boarding a bus in Cairo, passengers might have to run, because buses there often do not come to a full stop to take on patrons. Dublin bus riders would be expected to extend an arm to indicate that they want the bus to stop for them. And when boarding a commuter train in Mumbai, passengers must squeeze into overstuffed cars amid a lot of pushing and shoving on the crowded platforms. That kind of behavior would be considered the height of rudeness in the United States, but in Mumbai it reflects the daily challenges of getting around on a train system that is taxed to capacity.

In this example of commuting, culture consists of thoughts (expectations about personal space, for example) and tangible things (bus stops, trains, and seating capacity). **Material culture** refers to the objects or belongings of a group of people. Metro passes and bus tokens are part of material culture, as are automobiles, stores, and the physical structures where people worship. **Nonmaterial culture**, in contrast, consists of the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society. Material and nonmaterial aspects of culture are linked, and physical objects often symbolize cultural ideas. A metro pass is a material object, but it represents a form of nonmaterial culture, namely, capitalism, and the acceptance of paying for transportation. Clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry are part of material culture, but the appropriateness of wearing certain clothing for specific events reflects nonmaterial culture. A school building belongs to material culture, but the teaching methods and educational standards are part of education's nonmaterial culture. These material and nonmaterial aspects of culture can vary subtly from region to region. As people travel farther afield, moving from different regions to entirely different parts of the world, certain material and nonmaterial aspects of culture become dramatically unfamiliar. What happens when we encounter different cultures? As we interact with cultures other than our own, we become more aware of the differences and commonalities between others' worlds and our own.

Cultural Universals

Often, a comparison of one culture to another will reveal obvious differences. But all cultures also share common elements. **Cultural universals** are patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies. One example of a cultural universal is the family unit: every human society recognizes a family structure that regulates sexual reproduction and the care of children. Even so, how that family unit is defined and how it functions vary. In many Asian cultures, for example, family members from all generations commonly live together in one household. In these cultures, young adults continue to live in the extended household family structure until they marry and join their spouse's household, or they may remain and raise their nuclear family within the extended family's homestead. In the United States, by contrast, individuals are expected to leave home and live independently for a period before forming a family unit that consists of

parents and their offspring. Other cultural universals include customs like funeral rites, weddings, and celebrations of births. However, each culture may view the ceremonies quite differently.

Anthropologist George Murdock first recognized the existence of cultural universals while studying systems of kinship around the world. Murdock found that cultural universals often revolve around basic human survival, such as finding food, clothing, and shelter, or around shared human experiences, such as birth and death or illness and healing. Through his research, Murdock identified other universals including language, the concept of personal names, and, interestingly, jokes. Humor seems to be a universal way to release tensions and create a sense of unity among people (Murdock 1949). Sociologists consider humor necessary to human interaction because it helps individuals navigate otherwise tense situations.

Note:

Is Music a Cultural Universal?

Imagine that you are sitting in a theater, watching a film. The movie opens with the heroine sitting on a park bench with a grim expression on her face. Cue the music. The first slow and mournful notes play in a minor key. As the melody continues, the heroine turns her head and sees a man walking toward her. The music slowly gets louder, and the dissonance of the chords sends a prickle of fear running down your spine. You sense that the heroine is in danger.

Now imagine that you are watching the same movie, but with a different soundtrack. As the scene opens, the music is soft and soothing, with a hint of sadness. You see the heroine sitting on the park bench and sense her loneliness. Suddenly, the music swells. The woman looks up and sees a man walking toward her. The music grows fuller, and the pace picks up. You feel your heart rise in your chest. This is a happy moment.

Music has the ability to evoke emotional responses. In television shows, movies, even commercials, music elicits laughter, sadness, or fear. Are these types of musical cues cultural universals?

In 2009, a team of psychologists, led by Thomas Fritz of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany,

studied people’s reactions to music that they’d never heard (Fritz et al. 2009). The research team traveled to Cameroon, Africa, and asked Mafa tribal members to listen to Western music. The tribe, isolated from Western culture, had never been exposed to Western culture and had no context or experience within which to interpret its music. Even so, as the tribal members listened to a Western piano piece, they were able to recognize three basic emotions: happiness, sadness, and fear. Music, it turns out, is a sort of universal language.

Researchers also found that music can foster a sense of wholeness within a group. In fact, scientists who study the evolution of language have concluded that originally language (an established component of group identity) and music were one (Darwin 1871). Additionally, since music is largely nonverbal, the sounds of music can cross societal boundaries more easily than words. Music allows people to make connections, where language might be a more difficult barricade. As Fritz and his team found, music and the emotions it conveys can be cultural universals.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Despite how much humans have in common, cultural differences are far more prevalent than cultural universals. For example, while all cultures have language, analysis of particular language structures and conversational etiquette reveal tremendous differences. In some Middle Eastern cultures, it is common to stand close to others in conversation. North Americans keep more distance and maintain a large “personal space.” Even something as simple as eating and drinking varies greatly from culture to culture. If your professor comes into an early morning class holding a mug of liquid, what do you assume she is drinking? In the United States, it’s most likely filled with coffee, not Earl Grey tea, a favorite in England, or Yak Butter tea, a staple in Tibet.

The way cuisines vary across cultures fascinates many people. Some travelers pride themselves on their willingness to try unfamiliar foods, like celebrated food writer Anthony Bourdain, while others return home expressing gratitude for their native culture’s fare. Often, people in the

United States express disgust at other cultures' cuisine and think that it's gross to eat meat from a dog or guinea pig, for example, while they don't question their own habit of eating cows or pigs. Such attitudes are an example of **ethnocentrism**, or evaluating and judging another culture based on how it compares to one's own cultural norms. Ethnocentrism, as sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906) described the term, involves a belief or attitude that one's own culture is better than all others. Almost everyone is a little bit ethnocentric. For example, Americans tend to say that people from England drive on the "wrong" side of the road, rather than on the "other" side. Someone from a country where dog meat is standard fare might find it off-putting to see a dog in a French restaurant—not on the menu, but as a pet and patron's companion. A good example of ethnocentrism is referring to parts of Asia as the "Far East." One might question, "Far east of where?"

A high level of appreciation for one's own culture can be healthy; a shared sense of community pride, for example, connects people in a society. But ethnocentrism can lead to disdain or dislike for other cultures and could cause misunderstanding and conflict. People with the best intentions sometimes travel to a society to "help" its people, because they see them as uneducated or backward—essentially inferior. In reality, these travelers are guilty of **cultural imperialism**, the deliberate imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture. Europe's colonial expansion, begun in the sixteenth century, was often accompanied by a severe cultural imperialism. European colonizers often viewed the people in the lands they colonized as uncultured savages who were in need of European governance, dress, religion, and other cultural practices. A more modern example of cultural imperialism may include the work of international aid agencies who introduce agricultural methods and plant species from developed countries while overlooking indigenous varieties and agricultural approaches that are better suited to the particular region.

Ethnocentrism can be so strong that when confronted with all of the differences of a new culture, one may experience disorientation and frustration. In sociology, we call this **culture shock**. A traveler from Chicago might find the nightly silence of rural Montana unsettling, not peaceful. An exchange student from China might be annoyed by the

constant interruptions in class as other students ask questions—a practice that is considered rude in China. Perhaps the Chicago traveler was initially captivated with Montana's quiet beauty and the Chinese student was originally excited to see a U.S.-style classroom firsthand. But as they experience unanticipated differences from their own culture, their excitement gives way to discomfort and doubts about how to behave appropriately in the new situation. Eventually, as people learn more about a culture, they recover from culture shock.

Culture shock may appear because people aren't always expecting cultural differences. Anthropologist Ken Barger (1971) discovered this when he conducted a participatory observation in an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic. Originally from Indiana, Barger hesitated when invited to join a local snowshoe race. He knew he'd never hold his own against these experts. Sure enough, he finished last, to his mortification. But the tribal members congratulated him, saying, "You really tried!" In Barger's own culture, he had learned to value victory. To the Inuit people, winning was enjoyable, but their culture valued survival skills essential to their environment: how hard someone tried could mean the difference between life and death. Over the course of his stay, Barger participated in caribou hunts, learned how to take shelter in winter storms, and sometimes went days with little or no food to share among tribal members. Trying hard and working together, two nonmaterial values, were indeed much more important than winning.

During his time with the Inuit tribe, Barger learned to engage in cultural relativism. **Cultural relativism** is the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards rather than viewing it through the lens of one's own culture. Practicing cultural relativism requires an open mind and a willingness to consider, and even adapt to, new values and norms. However, indiscriminately embracing everything about a new culture is not always possible. Even the most culturally relativist people from egalitarian societies—ones in which women have political rights and control over their own bodies—would question whether the widespread practice of female genital mutilation in countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan should be accepted as a part of cultural tradition. Sociologists attempting to engage in

cultural relativism, then, may struggle to reconcile aspects of their own culture with aspects of a culture that they are studying.

Sometimes when people attempt to rectify feelings of ethnocentrism and develop cultural relativism, they swing too far to the other end of the spectrum. **Xenocentrism** is the opposite of ethnocentrism, and refers to the belief that another culture is superior to one's own. (The Greek root word *xeno*, pronounced "ZEE-no," means "stranger" or "foreign guest.") An exchange student who goes home after a semester abroad or a sociologist who returns from the field may find it difficult to associate with the values of their own culture after having experienced what they deem a more upright or nobler way of living.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for sociologists studying different cultures is the matter of keeping a perspective. It is impossible for anyone to keep all cultural biases at bay; the best we can do is strive to be aware of them. Pride in one's own culture doesn't have to lead to imposing its values on others. And an appreciation for another culture shouldn't preclude individuals from studying it with a critical eye.

Note:
Overcoming Culture Shock
During her summer vacation, Caitlin flew from Chicago to Madrid to visit Maria, the exchange student she'd befriended the previous semester. In the airport, she heard rapid, musical Spanish being spoken all around her. Exciting as it was, she felt isolated and disconnected. Maria's mother kissed Caitlin on both cheeks when she greeted her. Her imposing father kept his distance. Caitlin was half asleep by the time supper was served—at 10 p.m.! Maria's family sat at the table for hours, speaking loudly, gesturing, and arguing about politics, a taboo dinner subject in Caitlin's house. They served wine and toasted their honored guest. Caitlin had trouble interpreting her hosts' facial expressions, and didn't realize she should make the next toast. That night, Caitlin crawled into a strange bed, wishing she hadn't come. She missed her home and felt overwhelmed by the new customs, language, and surroundings. She'd studied Spanish in school for years—why hadn't it prepared her for this?

What Caitlin hadn’t realized was that people depend not only on spoken words but also on subtle cues like gestures and facial expressions, to communicate. Cultural norms accompany even the smallest nonverbal signals (DuBois 1951). They help people know when to shake hands, where to sit, how to converse, and even when to laugh. We relate to others through a shared set of cultural norms, and ordinarily, we take them for granted.

For this reason, culture shock is often associated with traveling abroad, although it can happen in one’s own country, state, or even hometown. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1960) is credited with first coining the term “culture shock.” In his studies, Oberg found that most people found encountering a new culture to be exciting at first. But bit by bit, they became stressed by interacting with people from a different culture who spoke another language and used different regional expressions. There was new food to digest, new daily schedules to follow, and new rules of etiquette to learn. Living with this constant stress can make people feel incompetent and insecure. People react to frustration in a new culture, Oberg found, by initially rejecting it and glorifying one’s own culture. An American visiting Italy might long for a “real” pizza or complain about the unsafe driving habits of Italians compared to people in the United States. It helps to remember that culture is learned. Everyone is ethnocentric to an extent, and identifying with one’s own country is natural.

Caitlin’s shock was minor compared to that of her friends Dayar and Mahlika, a Turkish couple living in married student housing on campus. And it was nothing like that of her classmate Sanai. Sanai had been forced to flee war-torn Bosnia with her family when she was fifteen. After two weeks in Spain, Caitlin had developed a bit more compassion and understanding for what those people had gone through. She understood that adjusting to a new culture takes time. It can take weeks or months to recover from culture shock, and it can take years to fully adjust to living in a new culture.

By the end of Caitlin’s trip, she’d made new lifelong friends. She’d stepped out of her comfort zone. She’d learned a lot about Spain, but she’d also discovered a lot about herself and her own culture.

Experiencing new cultures offers an opportunity to practice cultural relativism. (Photo courtesy of OledSidorenko/flickr)

Summary

Though “society” and “culture” are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. A society is a group of people sharing a community and culture. Culture generally describes the shared behaviors and beliefs of these people, and includes material and nonmaterial elements.. Our experience of cultural difference is influenced by our ethnocentrism and xenocentrism. Sociologists try to practice cultural relativism.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

The terms _____ and _____ are often used interchangeably, but have nuances that differentiate them.

a. imperialism and relativism
b. culture and society
c. society and ethnocentrism
d. ethnocentrism and xenocentrism

Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem:

The American flag is a material object that denotes the United States of America; however, there are certain connotations that many associate with the flag, like bravery and freedom. In this example, what are bravery and freedom?

a. Symbols
b. Language
c. Material culture
d. Nonmaterial culture

Solution:
Answer

D

Exercise:

Problem:

The belief that one’s culture is inferior to another culture is called:

a. ethnocentrism
b. nationalism
c. xenocentrism
d. imperialism

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

Rodney and Elise are U.S. students studying abroad in Italy. When they are introduced to their host families, the families kiss them on both cheeks. When Rodney’s host brother introduces himself and kisses Rodney on both cheeks, Rodney pulls back in surprise. Where he is from, unless they are romantically involved, men do not kiss one another. This is an example of:

a. culture shock
b. imperialism
c. ethnocentrism
d. xenocentrism

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

Most cultures have been found to identify laughter as a sign of humor, joy, or pleasure. Likewise, most cultures recognize music in some form. Music and laughter are examples of:

a. relativism
b. ethnocentrism
c. xenocentrism
d. universalism

Solution:
Answer

D

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Examine the difference between material and nonmaterial culture in your world. Identify ten objects that are part of your regular cultural experience. For each, then identify what aspects of nonmaterial culture (values and beliefs) that these objects represent. What has this exercise revealed to you about your culture?

Exercise:

Problem:

Do you feel that feelings of ethnocentricity or xenocentricity are more prevalent in U.S. culture? Why do you believe this? What issues or events might inform this?

Further Research

In January 2011, a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America presented evidence indicating that the hormone oxytocin could regulate and manage instances of ethnocentrism. Read the full article here: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/oxytocin

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Glossary

cultural imperialism
: the deliberate imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture

cultural relativism
: the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards, and not in comparison to another culture

cultural universals
: patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies

culture shock
: an experience of personal disorientation when confronted with an unfamiliar way of life

ethnocentrism
: the practice of evaluating another culture according to the standards of one's own culture

material culture
: the objects or belongings of a group of people

nonmaterial culture
: the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society

xenocentrism
: a belief that another culture is superior to one's own

Elements of Culture

- Understand how values and beliefs differ from norms
- Explain the significance of symbols and language to a culture
- Explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
- Discuss the role of social control within culture

Values and Beliefs

The first, and perhaps most crucial, elements of culture we will discuss are its values and beliefs. **Values** are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. **Beliefs** are the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs, but they also share collective values. To illustrate the difference, Americans commonly believe in the American Dream—that anyone who works hard enough will be successful and wealthy. Underlying this belief is the American value that wealth is good and important.

Values help shape a society by suggesting what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, sought or avoided. Consider the value that the United States places upon youth. Children represent innocence and purity, while a youthful adult appearance signifies sexuality. Shaped by this value, individuals spend millions of dollars each year on cosmetic products and surgeries to look young and beautiful. The United States also has an individualistic culture, meaning people place a high value on individuality and independence. In contrast, many other cultures are collectivist, meaning the welfare of the group and group relationships are a primary value.

Living up to a culture's values can be difficult. It's easy to value good health, but it's hard to quit smoking. Marital monogamy is valued, but many spouses engage in infidelity. Cultural diversity and equal opportunities for all people are valued in the United States, yet the country's highest political offices have been dominated by white men.

Values often suggest how people should behave, but they don't accurately reflect how people do behave. Values portray an **ideal culture**, the

standards society would like to embrace and live up to. But ideal culture differs from **real culture**, the way society actually is, based on what occurs and exists. In an ideal culture, there would be no traffic accidents, murders, poverty, or racial tension. But in real culture, police officers, lawmakers, educators, and social workers constantly strive to prevent or repair those accidents, crimes, and injustices. American teenagers are encouraged to value celibacy. However, the number of unplanned pregnancies among teens reveals that not only is the ideal hard to live up to, but the value alone is not enough to spare teenagers the potential consequences of having sex.

One way societies strive to put values into action is through rewards, sanctions, and punishments. When people observe the norms of society and uphold its values, they are often rewarded. A boy who helps an elderly woman board a bus may receive a smile and a "thank you." A business manager who raises profit margins may receive a quarterly bonus. People **sanction** certain behaviors by giving their support, approval, or permission, or by instilling formal actions of disapproval and nonsupport. Sanctions are a form of **social control**, a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms. Sometimes people conform to norms in anticipation or expectation of positive sanctions: good grades, for instance, may mean praise from parents and teachers. From a criminal justice perspective, properly used social control is also inexpensive crime control. Utilizing social control approaches pushes most people to conform to societal rules, regardless of whether authority figures (such as law enforcement) are present.

When people go against a society's values, they are punished. A boy who shoves an elderly woman aside to board the bus first may receive frowns or even a scolding from other passengers. A business manager who drives away customers will likely be fired. Breaking norms and rejecting values can lead to cultural sanctions such as earning a negative label—lazy, no-good bum—or to legal sanctions, such as traffic tickets, fines, or imprisonment.

Values are not static; they vary across time and between groups as people evaluate, debate, and change collective societal beliefs. Values also vary from culture to culture. For example, cultures differ in their values about what kinds of physical closeness are appropriate in public. It's rare to see

two male friends or coworkers holding hands in the United States where that behavior often symbolizes romantic feelings. But in many nations, masculine physical intimacy is considered natural in public. This difference in cultural values came to light when people reacted to photos of former president George W. Bush holding hands with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2005. A simple gesture, such as hand-holding, carries great symbolic differences across cultures.

In many parts of Africa and the Middle East, it is considered normal for men to hold hands in friendship. How would Americans react to these two soldiers? (Photo courtesy of Geordie Mott/Wikimedia Commons)

Norms

So far, the examples in this chapter have often described how people are expected to behave in certain situations—for example, when buying food or boarding a bus. These examples describe the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured, or what sociologists call

norms. **Norms** define how to behave in accordance with what a society has defined as good, right, and important, and most members of the society adhere to them.

Formal norms are established, written rules. They are behaviors worked out and agreed upon in order to suit and serve the most people. Laws are formal norms, but so are employee manuals, college entrance exam requirements, and “no running” signs at swimming pools. Formal norms are the most specific and clearly stated of the various types of norms, and they are the most strictly enforced. But even formal norms are enforced to varying degrees and are reflected in cultural values.

For example, money is highly valued in the United States, so monetary crimes are punished. It’s against the law to rob a bank, and banks go to great lengths to prevent such crimes. People safeguard valuable possessions and install antitheft devices to protect homes and cars. A less strictly enforced social norm is driving while intoxicated. While it’s against the law to drive drunk, drinking is for the most part an acceptable social behavior. And though there are laws to punish drunk driving, there are few systems in place to prevent the crime. These examples show a range of enforcement in formal norms.

There are plenty of formal norms, but the list of **informal norms**—casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to—is longer. People learn informal norms by observation, imitation, and general socialization. Some informal norms are taught directly—“Kiss your Aunt Edna” or “Use your napkin”—while others are learned by observation, including observations of the consequences when someone else violates a norm. But although informal norms define personal interactions, they extend into other systems as well. In the United States, there are informal norms regarding behavior at fast food restaurants. Customers line up to order their food and leave when they are done. They don’t sit down at a table with strangers, sing loudly as they prepare their condiments, or nap in a booth. Most people don’t commit even benign breaches of informal norms. Informal norms dictate appropriate behaviors without the need of written rules.

Note:

Breaching Experiments

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) studied people's customs in order to find out how societal rules and norms not only influenced behavior but also shaped social order. He believed that members of society together create a social order (Weber 2011). His resulting book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, published in 1967, discusses people's assumptions about the social makeup of their communities.

One of Garfinkel's research methods was known as a "breaching experiment," in which the researcher behaves in a socially awkward manner in order to test the sociological concepts of social norms and conformity. The participants are not aware an experiment is in progress. If the breach is successful, however, these "innocent bystanders" will respond in some way. For example, if the experimenter is, say, a man in a business suit, and he skips down the sidewalk or hops on one foot, the passersby are likely to stare at him with surprised expressions on their faces. But the experimenter does not simply "act weird" in public. Rather, the point is to deviate from a specific social norm in a small way, to subtly break some form of social etiquette, and see what happens.

To conduct his ethnomethodology, Garfinkel deliberately imposed strange behaviors on unknowing people. Then he observed their responses. He suspected that odd behaviors would shatter conventional expectations, but he wasn't sure how. For example, he set up a simple game of tic-tac-toe. One player was asked beforehand to mark Xs and Os not in the boxes but on the lines dividing the spaces instead. The other player, in the dark about the study, was flabbergasted and did not know how to continue. The second player's reactions of outrage, anger, puzzlement, or other emotions illustrated the existence of cultural norms that constitute social life. These cultural norms play an important role. They let us know how to behave around each other and how to feel comfortable in our community.

There are many rules about speaking with strangers in public. It's OK to tell a woman you like her shoes. It's not OK to ask if you can try them on. It's OK to stand in line behind someone at the ATM. It's not OK to look over his shoulder as he makes his transaction. It's OK to sit beside someone on a crowded bus. It's weird to sit beside a stranger in a half-empty bus.

For some breaches, the researcher directly engages with innocent bystanders. An experimenter might strike up a conversation in a public bathroom, where it's common to respect each other's privacy so fiercely as to ignore other people's presence. In a grocery store, an experimenter might take a food item out of another person's grocery cart, saying, "That looks good! I think I'll try it." An experimenter might sit down at a table with others in a fast food restaurant or follow someone around a museum and study the same paintings. In those cases, the bystanders are pressured to respond, and their discomfort illustrates how much we depend on social norms. Breaching experiments uncover and explore the many unwritten social rules we live by.

Norms may be further classified as either mores or folkways. **Mores** (mor-ays) are norms that embody the moral views and principles of a group. Violating them can have serious consequences. The strongest mores are legally protected with laws or other formal norms. In the United States, for instance, murder is considered immoral, and it's punishable by law (a formal norm). But more often, mores are judged and guarded by public sentiment (an informal norm). People who violate mores are seen as shameful. They can even be shunned or banned from some groups. The mores of the U.S. school system require that a student's writing be in the student's own words or use special forms (such as quotation marks and a whole system of citation) for crediting other writers. Writing another person's words as if they are one's own has a name—plagiarism. The consequences for violating this norm are severe and usually result in expulsion.

Unlike mores, **folkways** are norms without any moral underpinnings. Rather, folkways direct appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture. They indicate whether to shake hands or kiss on the cheek when greeting another person. They specify whether to wear a tie and blazer or a T-shirt and sandals to an event. In Canada, women can smile and say hello to men on the street. In Egypt, that's not acceptable. In regions in the southern United States, bumping into an acquaintance means stopping to chat. It's considered rude not to, no matter how busy one is. In

other regions, people guard their privacy and value time efficiency. A simple nod of the head is enough. Other accepted folkways in the United States may include holding the door open for a stranger or giving someone a gift on their birthday. The rules regarding these folkways may change from culture to culture.

Many folkways are actions we take for granted. People need to act without thinking in order to get seamlessly through daily routines; they can't stop and analyze every action (Sumner 1906). Those who experience culture shock may find that it subsides as they learn the new culture's folkways and are able to move through their daily routines more smoothly. Folkways might be small manners, learned by observation and imitated, but they are by no means trivial. Like mores and laws, these norms help people negotiate their daily lives within a given culture.

Symbols and Language

Humans, consciously and subconsciously, are always striving to make sense of their surrounding world. **Symbols**—such as gestures, signs, objects, signals, and words—help people understand that world. They provide clues to understanding experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by societies.

The world is filled with symbols. Sports uniforms, company logos, and traffic signs are symbols. In some cultures, a gold ring is a symbol of marriage. Some symbols are highly functional; stop signs, for instance, provide useful instruction. As physical objects, they belong to material culture, but because they function as symbols, they also convey nonmaterial cultural meanings. Some symbols are valuable only in what they represent. Trophies, blue ribbons, or gold medals, for example, serve no other purpose than to represent accomplishments. But many objects have both material and nonmaterial symbolic value.

A police officer's badge and uniform are symbols of authority and law enforcement. The sight of an officer in uniform or a squad car triggers reassurance in some citizens, and annoyance, fear, or anger in others.

It’s easy to take symbols for granted. Few people challenge or even think about stick figure signs on the doors of public bathrooms. But those figures are more than just symbols that tell men and women which bathrooms to use. They also uphold the value, in the United States, that public restrooms should be gender exclusive. Even though stalls are relatively private, most places don’t offer unisex bathrooms.

Some road signs are universal. But how would you interpret the signage on the right? (Photo (a) courtesy of Andrew Bain/flickr; Photo (b) courtesy of HonzaSoukup/flickr)

Symbols often get noticed when they are out of context. Used unconventionally, they convey strong messages. A stop sign on the door of a corporation makes a political statement, as does a camouflage military jacket worn in an antiwar protest. Together, the semaphore signals for “N” and “D” represent nuclear disarmament—and form the well-known peace sign (Westcott 2008). Today, some college students have taken to wearing pajamas and bedroom slippers to class, clothing that was formerly associated only with privacy and bedtime. Though students might deny it, the outfit defies traditional cultural norms and makes a statement.

Even the destruction of symbols is symbolic. Effigies representing public figures are burned to demonstrate anger at certain leaders. In 1989, crowds tore down the Berlin Wall, a decades-old symbol of the division between East and West Germany, communism, and capitalism.

While different cultures have varying systems of symbols, one symbol is common to all: language. **Language** is a symbolic system through which people communicate and through which culture is transmitted. Some languages contain a system of symbols used for written communication, while others rely on only spoken communication and nonverbal actions.

Societies often share a single language, and many languages contain the same basic elements. An alphabet is a written system made of symbolic shapes that refer to spoken sound. Taken together, these symbols convey specific meanings. The English alphabet uses a combination of twenty-six letters to create words; these twenty-six letters make up over 600,000 recognized English words (OED Online 2011).

Rules for speaking and writing vary even within cultures, most notably by region. Do you refer to a can of carbonated liquid as “soda,” pop,” or “Coke”? Is a household entertainment room a “family room,” “rec room,” or “den”? When leaving a restaurant, do you ask your server for a “check,” the “ticket,” or your “bill”?

Language is constantly evolving as societies create new ideas. In this age of technology, people have adapted almost instantly to new nouns such as “e-mail” and “Internet,” and verbs such as “downloading,” “texting,” and “blogging.” Twenty years ago, the general public would have considered these nonsense words.

Even while it constantly evolves, language continues to shape our reality. This insight was established in the 1920s by two linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. They believed that reality is culturally determined, and that any interpretation of reality is based on a society’s language. To prove this point, the sociologists argued that every language has words or expressions specific to that language. In the United States, for example, the number thirteen is associated with bad luck. In Japan, however, the number

four is considered unlucky, since it is pronounced similarly to the Japanese word for “death.”

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** is based on the idea that people experience their world through their language, and that they therefore understand their world through the culture embedded in their language. The hypothesis, which has also been called linguistic relativity, states that language shapes thought (Swoyer 2003). Studies have shown, for instance, that unless people have access to the word “ambivalent,” they don’t recognize an experience of uncertainty from having conflicting positive and negative feelings about one issue. Essentially, the hypothesis argues, if a person can’t describe the experience, the person is not having the experience.

In addition to using language, people communicate without words. Nonverbal communication is symbolic, and, as in the case of language, much of it is learned through one’s culture. Some gestures are nearly universal: smiles often represent joy, and crying often represents sadness. Other nonverbal symbols vary across cultural contexts in their meaning. A thumbs-up, for example, indicates positive reinforcement in the United States, whereas in Russia and Australia, it is an offensive curse (Passero 2002). Other gestures vary in meaning depending on the situation and the person. A wave of the hand can mean many things, depending on how it’s done and for whom. It may mean “hello,” “goodbye,” “no thank you,” or “I’m royalty.” Winks convey a variety of messages, including “We have a secret,” “I’m only kidding,” or “I’m attracted to you.” From a distance, a person can understand the emotional gist of two people in conversation just by watching their body language and facial expressions. Furrowed brows and folded arms indicate a serious topic, possibly an argument. Smiles, with heads lifted and arms open, suggest a lighthearted, friendly chat.

Note:
Is the United States Bilingual?
In 1991, when she was six years old, Lucy Alvarez attended a school that allowed for the use of both English and Spanish. Lucy’s teacher was bilingual, the librarian offered bilingual books, and many of the school staff spoke both Spanish and English. Lucy and many of her classmates

who spoke only Spanish at home were lucky. According to the U.S. Census, 13.8 percent of U.S. residents speak a non-English language at home. That's a significant figure, but not enough to ensure that Lucy would be encouraged to use her native language in school (Mount 2010).

Lucy's parents, who moved to Texas from Mexico, struggled under the pressure to speak English. Lucy might easily have gotten lost and left behind if she'd felt the same pressure in school. In 2008, researchers from Johns Hopkins University conducted a series of studies on the effects of bilingual education (Slavin et al. 2008). They found that students taught in both their native tongue and English make better progress than those taught only in English.

Technically, the United States has no official language. But many believe English to be the rightful language of the United States, and over thirty states have passed laws specifying English as the official tongue.

Proponents of English-only laws suggest that a national ruling will save money on translation, printing, and human resource costs, including funding for bilingual teachers. They argue that setting English as the official language will encourage non-English speakers to learn English faster and adapt to the culture of the United States more easily (Mount 2010).

Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) oppose making English the official language and claim that it violates the rights of non-English speakers. English-only laws, they believe, deny the reality of our nation's diversity and unfairly target Latinos and Asians. They point to the fact that much of the debate on this topic has risen since 1970, a time when the United States experienced new waves of immigration from Asia and Mexico.

Today, a lot of product information gets written in multiple languages. Enter a store like Home Depot and you'll find signs in both English and Spanish. Buy a children's product, and the safety warnings could be presented in multiple languages. While marketers are financially motivated to reach the largest number of consumers possible, this trend also may help people acclimate to a culture of bilingualism.

Studies show that most U.S. immigrants eventually abandon their native tongues and become fluent in English. Bilingual education helps with that transition. Today, Lucy Alvarez is an ambitious and high-achieving college student. Fluent in both English and Spanish, Lucy is studying law

enforcement—a field that seeks bilingual employees. The same bilingualism that contributed to her success in grade school will help her thrive professionally as a law officer serving her community.

Nowadays, many signs—on streets and in stores—include both English and Spanish. What effect does this have on members of society? What effect does it have on our culture? (Photo courtesy of istolethetv/flickr)

Summary

A culture consists of many elements, such as the values and beliefs of its society. Culture is also governed by norms, including laws, mores, and folkways. The symbols and language of a society are key to developing and conveying culture.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem: A nation’s flag is:

a. A symbol
b. A value
c. A culture
d. A folkway

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

The existence of social norms, both formal and informal, is one of the main things that inform _____, otherwise known as a way to encourage social conformity.

a. values
b. sanctions
c. social control
d. mores

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem: The biggest difference between mores and folkways is that

a. mores are primarily linked to morality, whereas folkways are primarily linked to being commonplace within a culture

b. mores are absolute, whereas folkways are temporary
c. mores refer to material culture, whereas folkways refer to nonmaterial culture
d. mores refer to nonmaterial culture, whereas folkways refer to material culture

---

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

The notion that people cannot feel or experience something that they do not have a word for can be explained by:

a. linguistics
b. Sapir-Whorf
c. Ethnographic imagery
d. bilingualism

Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem: Cultural sanctions can also be viewed as ways that society:

a. Establishes leaders
b. Determines language
c. Regulates behavior
d. Determines laws

Solution:
Answer

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

What do you think of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis? Do you agree or disagree with it? Cite examples or research to support your point of view.

Exercise:

Problem:

How do you think your culture would exist if there were no such thing as a social “norm”? Do you think chaos would ensue or relative peace could be kept? Explain.

Further Research

The science-fiction novel, *Babel-17*, by Samuel R. Delaney was based upon the principles of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Read an excerpt from the novel here: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Babel-17

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Glossary

beliefs
: tenets or convictions that people hold to be true

folkways
: direct, appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture

formal norms

established, written rules

ideal culture
: the standards a society would like to embrace and live up to

informal norms
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mores
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norms
: the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured

real culture
: the way society really is based on what actually occurs and exists

sanctions
: a way to authorize or formally disapprove of certain behaviors

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
: the way that people understand the world based on their form of language

social control
: a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms

symbols
: gestures or objects that have meanings associated with them that are recognized by people who share a culture

values
: a culture’s standard for discerning what is good and just in society

Pop Culture, Subculture, and Cultural Change

- Discuss the roles of both high culture and pop culture within society
- Differentiate between subculture and counterculture
- Explain the role of innovation, invention, and discovery in culture
- Understand the role of cultural lag and globalization in cultural change

It may seem obvious that there are a multitude of cultural differences between societies in the world. After all, we can easily see that people vary from one society to the next. It's natural that a young woman from rural Kenya would have a very different view of the world from an elderly man in Mumbai—one of the most populated cities in the world. Additionally, each culture has its own internal variations. Sometimes the differences between cultures are not nearly as large as the differences inside cultures.

High Culture and Popular Culture

Do you prefer listening to opera or hip hop music? Do you like watching horse racing or NASCAR? Do you read books of poetry or celebrity magazines? In each pair, one type of entertainment is considered high-brow and the other low-brow. Sociologists use the term **high culture** to describe the pattern of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in the highest class segments of a society. People often associate high culture with intellectualism, political power, and prestige. In America, high culture also tends to be associated with wealth. Events considered high culture can be expensive and formal—attending a ballet, seeing a play, or listening to a live symphony performance.

The term **popular culture** refers to the pattern of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in mainstream society. Popular culture events might include a parade, a baseball game, or the season finale of a television show. Rock and pop music—"pop" is short for "popular"—are part of popular culture. Popular culture is often expressed and spread via commercial media such as radio, television, movies, the music industry, publishers, and corporate-run websites. Unlike high culture, popular culture is known and accessible to most people. You can share a discussion of favorite football teams with a new coworker or comment on *American Idol* when making

small talk in line at the grocery store. But if you tried to launch into a deep discussion on the classical Greek play *Antigone*, few members of U.S. society today would be familiar with it.

Although high culture may be viewed as superior to popular culture, the labels of high culture and popular culture vary over time and place. Shakespearean plays, considered pop culture when they were written, are now part of our society's high culture. Five hundred years from now, will our descendants associate *Breaking Bad* with the cultural elite?

Subculture and Counterculture

A **subculture** is just what it sounds like—a smaller cultural group within a larger culture; people of a subculture are part of the larger culture but also share a specific identity within a smaller group.

Thousands of subcultures exist within the United States. Ethnic and racial groups share the language, food, and customs of their heritage. Other subcultures are united by shared experiences. Biker culture revolves around a dedication to motorcycles. Some subcultures are formed by members who possess traits or preferences that differ from the majority of a society's population. The body modification community embraces aesthetic additions to the human body, such as tattoos, piercings, and certain forms of plastic surgery. In the United States, adolescents often form subcultures to develop a shared youth identity. Alcoholics Anonymous offers support to those suffering from alcoholism. But even as members of a subculture band together, they still identify with and participate in the larger society.

Sociologists distinguish subcultures from **countercultures**, which are a type of subculture that rejects some of the larger culture's norms and values. In contrast to subcultures, which operate relatively smoothly within the larger society, countercultures might actively defy larger society by developing their own set of rules and norms to live by, sometimes even creating communities that operate outside of greater society.

Cults, a word derived from culture, are also considered counterculture group. The group "Yearning for Zion" (YFZ) in Eldorado, Texas, existed

outside the mainstream and the limelight, until its leader was accused of statutory rape and underage marriage. The sect's formal norms clashed too severely to be tolerated by U.S. law, and in 2008, authorities raided the compound and removed more than two hundred women and children from the property.

Note:

The Evolution of American Hipster Subculture

Skinny jeans, chunky glasses, and T-shirts with vintage logos—the American hipster is a recognizable figure in the modern United States. Based predominately in metropolitan areas, sometimes clustered around hotspots such as the Williamsburg neighborhood in New York City, hipsters define themselves through a rejection of the mainstream. As a subculture, hipsters spurn many of the values and beliefs of U.S. culture and prefer vintage clothing to fashion and a bohemian lifestyle to one of wealth and power. While hipster culture may seem to be the new trend among young, middle-class youth, the history of the group stretches back to the early decades of the 1900s.

Where did the hipster culture begin? In the early 1940s, jazz music was on the rise in the United States. Musicians were known as "hepcats" and had a smooth, relaxed quality that went against upright, mainstream life. Those who were "hep" or "hip" lived by the code of jazz, while those who were "square" lived according to society's rules. The idea of a "hipster" was born.

The hipster movement spread, and young people, drawn to the music and fashion, took on attitudes and language derived from the culture of jazz. Unlike the vernacular of the day, hipster slang was purposefully ambiguous. When hipsters said, "It's cool, man," they meant not that everything was good, but that it was the way it was.

In the 1940s, U.S. hipsters were associated with the "cool" culture of jazz. (Photo courtesy of William P. Gottlieb/Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress)

By the 1950s, the jazz culture was winding down and many traits of hepcat culture were becoming mainstream. A new subculture was on the rise. The "Beat Generation," a title coined by writer Jack Kerouac, were anticonformist and antimaterialistic. They were writers who listened to jazz and embraced radical politics. They bummed around, hitchhiked the country, and lived in squalor.

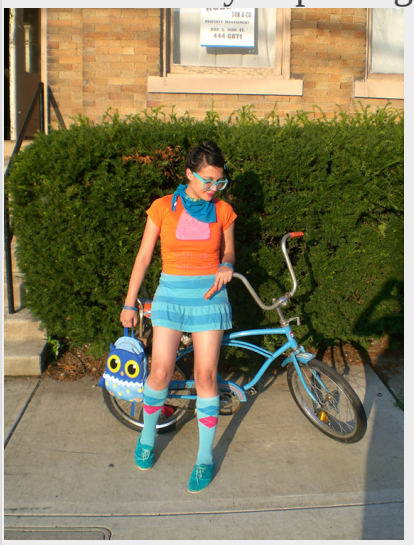
The lifestyle spread. College students, clutching copies of Kerouac's *On the Road*, dressed in berets, black turtlenecks, and black-rimmed glasses. Women wore black leotards and grew their hair long. Herb Caen, a San Francisco journalist, used the suffix from *Sputnik 1*, the Russian satellite that orbited Earth in 1957, to dub the movement's followers "Beatniks."

As the Beat Generation faded, a new, related movement began. It too focused on breaking social boundaries, but it also advocated freedom of

expression, philosophy, and love. It took its name from the generations before; in fact, some theorists claim that Beats themselves coined the term to describe their children. Over time, the “little hipsters” of the 1970s became known simply as “hippies.”

Today’s generation of hipsters rose out of the hippie movement in the same way that hippies rose from Beats and Beats from hepcats. Although contemporary hipsters may not seem to have much in common with 1940s hipsters, the emulation of nonconformity is still there. In 2010, sociologist Mark Greif set about investigating the hipster subculture of the United States and found that much of what tied the group members together was not based on fashion, musical taste, or even a specific point of contention with the mainstream. “All hipsters play at being the inventors or first adopters of novelties,” Greif wrote. “Pride comes from knowing, and deciding, what’s cool in advance of the rest of the world. Yet the habits of hatred and accusation are endemic to hipsters because they feel the weakness of everyone’s position—including their own” (Greif 2010). Much as the hepcats of the jazz era opposed common culture with carefully crafted appearances of coolness and relaxation, modern hipsters reject mainstream values with a purposeful apathy.

Young people are often drawn to oppose mainstream conventions, even if in the same way that others do. Ironic, cool to the point of noncaring, and intellectual, hipsters continue to embody a subculture, while simultaneously impacting mainstream culture.



Intellectual and

trendy, today's hipsters define themselves through cultural irony. (Photo courtesy of Lorena Cupcake/Wikimedia Commons)

Cultural Change

As the hipster example illustrates, culture is always evolving. Moreover, new things are added to material culture every day, and they affect nonmaterial culture as well. Cultures change when something new (say, railroads or smartphones) opens up new ways of living and when new ideas enter a culture (say, as a result of travel or globalization).

Innovation: Discovery and Invention

An **innovation** refers to an object or concept's initial appearance in society—it's innovative because it is markedly new. There are two ways to come across an innovative object or idea: discover it or invent it. **Discoveries** make known previously unknown but existing aspects of reality. In 1610, when Galileo looked through his telescope and discovered Saturn, the planet was already there, but until then, no one had known about it. When Christopher Columbus encountered America, the land was, of course, already well known to its inhabitants. However, Columbus's discovery was new knowledge for Europeans, and it opened the way to changes in European culture, as well as to the cultures of the discovered lands. For example, new foods such as potatoes and tomatoes transformed the European diet, and horses brought from Europe changed hunting practices of Native American tribes of the Great Plains.

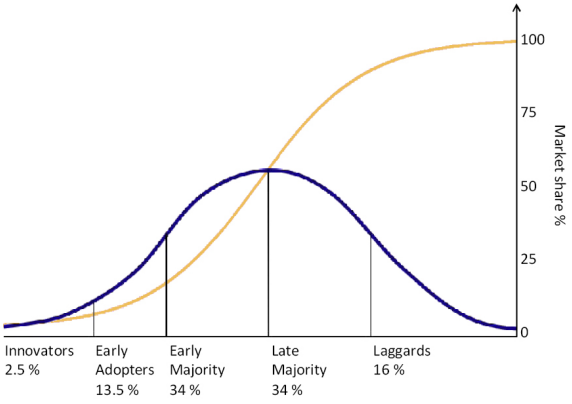
Inventions result when something new is formed from existing objects or concepts—when things are put together in an entirely new manner. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, electric appliances were invented at an astonishing pace. Cars, airplanes, vacuum cleaners, lamps, radios, telephones, and televisions were all new inventions. Inventions may shape a culture when people use them in place of older ways of carrying out activities and relating to others, or as a way to carry out new kinds of activities. Their adoption reflects (and may shape) cultural values, and their use may require new norms for new situations.

Consider the introduction of modern communication technology, such as mobile phones and smartphones. As more and more people began carrying these devices, phone conversations no longer were restricted to homes, offices, and phone booths. People on trains, in restaurants, and in other public places became annoyed by listening to one-sided conversations. Norms were needed for cell phone use. Some people pushed for the idea that those who are out in the world should pay attention to their companions and surroundings. However, technology enabled a workaround: texting, which enables quiet communication and has surpassed phoning as the chief way to meet today's highly valued ability to stay in touch anywhere, everywhere.

When the pace of innovation increases, it can lead to generation gaps. Technological gadgets that catch on quickly with one generation are sometimes dismissed by a skeptical older generation. A culture's objects and ideas can cause not just generational but cultural gaps. Material culture tends to diffuse more quickly than nonmaterial culture; technology can spread through society in a matter of months, but it can take generations for the ideas and beliefs of society to change. Sociologist William F. Ogburn coined the term **culture lag** to refer to this time that elapses between the introduction of a new item of material culture and its acceptance as part of nonmaterial culture (Ogburn 1957).

Culture lag can also cause tangible problems. The infrastructure of the United States, built a hundred years ago or more, is having trouble supporting today's more heavily populated and fast-paced life. Yet there is a lag in conceptualizing solutions to infrastructure problems. Rising fuel

prices, increased air pollution, and traffic jams are all symptoms of culture lag. Although people are becoming aware of the consequences of overusing resources, the means to support changes takes time to achieve.



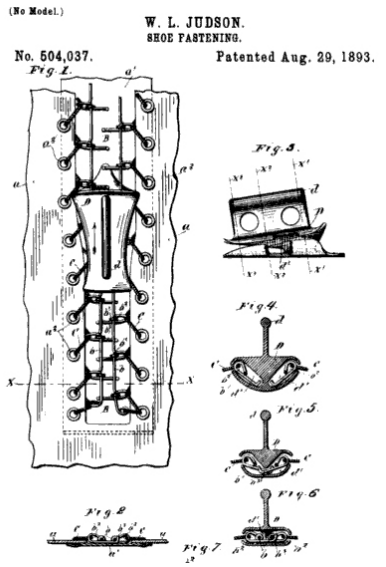
Sociologist Everett Rogers (1962) developed a model of the diffusion of innovations. As consumers gradually adopt a new innovation, the item grows toward a market share of 100 percent, or complete saturation within a society. (Graph courtesy of Tungsten/Wikimedia Commons)

Diffusion and Globalization

The integration of world markets and technological advances of the last decades have allowed for greater exchange between cultures through the processes of globalization and diffusion. Beginning in the 1980s, Western governments began to deregulate social services while granting greater

liberties to private businesses. As a result, world markets became dominated by multinational companies in the 1980s, a new state of affairs at that time. We have since come to refer to this integration of international trade and finance markets as **globalization**. Increased communications and air travel have further opened doors for international business relations, facilitating the flow not only of goods but also of information and people as well (Scheuerman 2014 (revised)). Today, many U.S. companies set up offices in other nations where the costs of resources and labor are cheaper. When a person in the United States calls to get information about banking, insurance, or computer services, the person taking that call may be working in another country.

Alongside the process of globalization is **diffusion**, or the spread of material and nonmaterial culture. While globalization refers to the integration of markets, diffusion relates to a similar process in the integration of international cultures. Middle-class Americans can fly overseas and return with a new appreciation of Thai noodles or Italian gelato. Access to television and the Internet has brought the lifestyles and values portrayed in U.S. sitcoms into homes around the globe. Twitter feeds from public demonstrations in one nation have encouraged political protesters in other countries. When this kind of diffusion occurs, material objects and ideas from one culture are introduced into another.


(No Model.)
W. L. JUDSON.
SHOE FASTENING.
No. 504,037. Patented Aug. 29, 1893.
Fig. 1.
Fig. 3.
Fig. 4.
Fig. 5.
Fig. 6.
Fig. 2
Fig. 7

Officially patented in 1893 as the “clasp locker” (left), the zipper did not diffuse through society for many decades. Today, it is immediately recognizable around the world. (Photo (a) courtesy of U.S. Patent Office/Wikimedia Commons; Photo (b) courtesy of Rabensteiner/Wikimedia Commons)

Summary

Sociologists recognize high culture and popular culture within societies. Societies are also comprised of many subcultures—smaller groups that share an identity. Countercultures reject mainstream values and create their own cultural rules and norms. Through invention or discovery, cultures evolve via new ideas and new ways of thinking. In many modern cultures, the cornerstone of innovation is technology, the rapid growth of which can lead to cultural lag. Technology is also responsible for the spread of both material and nonmaterial culture that contributes to globalization.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

An example of high culture is _____, whereas an example of popular culture would be _____.

a. Dostoevsky style in film; “American Idol” winners
b. medical marijuana; film noir
c. country music; pop music
d. political theory; sociological theory

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem: The Ku Klux Klan is an example of what part of culture?

a. Counterculture
b. Subculture
c. Multiculturalism
d. Afrocentricity

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem: Modern-day hipsters are an example of:

a. ethnocentricity
b. counterculture
c. subculture
d. high culture

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

Your eighty-three-year-old grandmother has been using a computer for some time now. As a way to keep in touch, you frequently send emails of a few lines to let her know about your day. She calls after every email to respond point by point, but she has never emailed a response back. This can be viewed as an example of:

a. cultural lag
b. innovation
c. ethnocentricity
d. xenophobia

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

Some jobs today advertise in multinational markets and permit telecommuting in lieu of working from a primary location. This broadening of the job market and the way that jobs are performed can be attributed to:

a. cultural lag
b. innovation
c. discovery
d. globalization

Solution:
Answer

D

Exercise:

Problem: The major difference between invention and discovery is:

a. Invention is based on technology, whereas discovery is usually based on culture
b. Discovery involves finding something that already exists, but invention puts things together in a new way
c. Invention refers to material culture, whereas discovery can be material or theoretic, like laws of physics
d. Invention is typically used to refer to international objects, whereas discovery refers to that which is local to one's culture

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Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem:

That McDonald's is found in almost every country around the world is an example of:

a. globalization
b. diffusion
c. culture lag
d. xenocentrism

Solution:
Answer

B

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Identify several examples of popular culture and describe how they inform larger culture. How prevalent is the effect of these examples in your everyday life?

Exercise:

Problem:

Consider some of the specific issues or concerns of your generation. Are any ideas countercultural? What subcultures have emerged from your generation? How have the issues of your generation expressed themselves culturally? How has your generation made its mark on society's collective culture?

Exercise:

Problem:

What are some examples of cultural lag that are present in your life? Do you think technology affects culture positively or negatively? Explain.

Further Research

The Beats were a counterculture that birthed an entire movement of art, music, and literature—much of which is still highly regarded and studied today. The man responsible for naming the generation was Jack Kerouac; however, the man responsible for introducing the world to that generation was John Clellon Holmes, a writer often lumped in with the group. In 1952 he penned an article for the *New York Times Magazine* titled, "This Is the Beat Generation." Read that article and learn more about Clellon Holmes and the Beats: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/The-Beats

Popular culture meets counterculture in this as Oprah Winfrey interacts with members of the Yearning for Zion cult. Read about it here: http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Oprah

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Glossary

countercultures
: groups that reject and oppose society’s widely accepted cultural patterns

culture lag
: the gap of time between the introduction of material culture and nonmaterial culture’s acceptance of it

diffusion
: the spread of material and nonmaterial culture from one culture to another

discoveries
: things and ideas found from what already exists

globalization
: the integration of international trade and finance markets

high culture

the cultural patterns of a society’s elite

innovations
: new objects or ideas introduced to culture for the first time

inventions
: a combination of pieces of existing reality into new forms

popular culture
: mainstream, widespread patterns among a society’s population

subcultures
: groups that share a specific identification, apart from a society’s majority, even as the members exist within a larger society

Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

- Discuss the major theoretical approaches to cultural interpretation

Music, fashion, technology, and values—all are products of culture. But what do they mean? How do sociologists perceive and interpret culture based on these material and nonmaterial items? Let's finish our analysis of culture by reviewing them in the context of three theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalists view society as a system in which all parts work—or function—together to create society as a whole. In this way, societies need culture to exist. Cultural norms function to support the fluid operation of society, and cultural values guide people in making choices. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill a society's needs, culture exists to meet its members' basic needs.

Functionalists also study culture in terms of values. Education is an important concept in the United States because it is valued. The culture of education—including material culture such as classrooms, textbooks, libraries, dormitories—supports the emphasis placed on the value of educating a society's members.

This statue of Superman stands in the center of Metropolis, Illinois. His pedestal reads "Truth—Justice—The American Way." How would a

functionalist interpret this statue? What does it reveal about the values of American culture? (Photo courtesy of David Wilson/flickr)

Conflict theorists view social structure as inherently unequal, based on power differentials related to issues like class, gender, race, and age. For a conflict theorist, culture is seen as reinforcing issues of "privilege" for certain groups based upon race, sex, class, and so on. Women strive for equality in a male-dominated society. Senior citizens struggle to protect their rights, their health care, and their independence from a younger generation of lawmakers. Advocacy groups such as the ACLU work to protect the rights of all races and ethnicities in the United States.

Inequalities exist within a culture's value system. Therefore, a society's cultural norms benefit some people but hurt others. Some norms, formal and informal, are practiced at the expense of others. Women were not allowed to vote in the United States until 1920. Gay and lesbian couples have been denied the right to marry in some states. Racism and bigotry are very much alive today. Although cultural diversity is supposedly valued in the United States, many people still frown upon interracial marriages. Same-sex marriages are banned in most states, and polygamy—common in some cultures—is unthinkable to most Americans.

At the core of conflict theory is the effect of economic production and materialism: dependence on technology in rich nations versus a lack of technology and education in poor nations. Conflict theorists believe that a society's system of material production has an effect on the rest of culture. People who have less power also have less ability to adapt to cultural change. This view contrasts with the perspective of functionalism. In the U.S. culture of capitalism, to illustrate, we continue to strive toward the promise of the American dream, which perpetuates the belief that the wealthy deserve their privileges.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that is most concerned with the face-to-face interactions between members of society. Interactionists see culture as being created and maintained by the ways people interact and in how individuals interpret each other's actions. Proponents of this theory conceptualize human interactions as a continuous process of deriving meaning from both objects in the environment and the actions of others. This is where the term symbolic comes into play. Every object and action has a symbolic meaning, and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate their interpretations of these meanings to others. Those who believe in symbolic interactionism perceive culture as highly dynamic and fluid, as it is dependent on how meaning is interpreted and how individuals interact when conveying these meanings.

We began this chapter by asking what culture is. Culture is comprised of all the practices, beliefs, and behaviors of a society. Because culture is learned, it includes how people think and express themselves. While we may like to consider ourselves individuals, we must acknowledge the impact of culture; we inherit thought language that shapes our perceptions and patterned behavior, including about issues of family and friends, and faith and politics.

To an extent, culture is a social comfort. After all, sharing a similar culture with others is precisely what defines societies. Nations would not exist if people did not coexist culturally. There could be no societies if people did not share heritage and language, and civilization would cease to function if people did not agree on similar values and systems of social control. Culture is preserved through transmission from one generation to the next, but it also evolves through processes of innovation, discovery, and cultural diffusion. We may be restricted by the confines of our own culture, but as humans we have the ability to question values and make conscious decisions. No better evidence of this freedom exists than the amount of cultural diversity within our own society and around the world. The more we study another culture, the better we become at understanding our own.

This child’s clothing may be culturally specific, but her facial expression is universal. (Photo courtesy of Beth Rankin/flickr)

Summary

There are three major theoretical approaches toward the interpretation of culture. A functionalist perspective acknowledges that there are many parts of culture that work together as a system to fulfill society’s needs. Functionalists view culture as a reflection of society’s values. Conflict theorists see culture as inherently unequal, based upon factors like gender, class, race, and age. An interactionist is primarily interested in culture as experienced in the daily interactions between individuals and the symbols that comprise a culture. Various cultural and sociological occurrences can be explained by these theories; however, there is no one “right” view through which to understand culture.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

A sociologist conducts research into the ways that Hispanic American students are historically underprivileged in the U.S. education system. What theoretical approach is the sociologist using?

a. Symbolic interactionism
b. Functionalism
c. Conflict theory
d. Ethnocentrism

Solution:
Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 grew to be an international movement. Supporters believe that the economic disparity between the highest economic class and the mid to lower economic classes is growing at an exponentially alarming rate. A sociologist who studies that movement by examining the interactions between members at Occupy camps would most likely use what theoretical approach?

a. Symbolic interactionism
b. Functionalism
c. Conflict theory
d. Ethnocentrism

Solution:
Answer

A

Exercise:

Problem:

What theoretical perspective views society as having a system of interdependent inherently connected parts?

a. Sociobiology
b. Functionalism
c. Conflict theory
d. Ethnocentrism

Solution:
Answer

B

Exercise:

Problem:

The “American Dream”—the notion that anybody can be successful and rich if they work hard enough—is most commonly associated with which sociological theory?

a. Sociobiology
b. Functionalism
c. Conflict theory
d. Ethnocentrism

Solution:
Answer

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Consider a current social trend that you have witnessed, perhaps situated around family, education, transportation, or finances. For example, many veterans of the Armed Forces, after completing tours of duty in the Middle East, are returning to college rather than entering jobs as veterans as previous generations did. Choose a sociological approach—functionalism, conflict theory, or symbolic interactionism—to describe, explain, and analyze the social issue you choose. Afterward, determine why you chose the approach you did. Does it suit your own way of thinking? Or did it offer the best method to illuminate the social issue?